

Cody changed out of his funeral clothes and into his going out clothes. White oxford shirt, brown belt, light khaki pants, and gray oxford shoes. He capped it with two spritzes of cologne to the pulse points of his wrists and neck. Clubman Hair Gel redirected his hair and exuded a light musty scent that complimented that of the cologne.

This could be the most important night of his life. He could imagine telling people “this was the most important night of my life. Even when I was getting ready, I knew it had that potential. I was thinking of how I could tell people about the night to come.”

Cody was going to meet Teresa at Dino’s Bar and Grill at 10. It was the perfect storyline. Soul mates for life. Met as young children. Separated. Reunited by the death of his grandmother fifteen-ish years later. Ride off into the sunset. He had assumed his life was a random turn of events and decisions with no accumulating significance. Now, he could see the fabric of it all; his whole life had led to this night.

And the night was going to start with him being late. The deliberate, dramatic dressing and daydreaming had led to an unnecessary amount of time spent. It was 9:30 by the time he left his bedroom, and he wanted to be on the turnpike by then.

The drive from Milford to New Haven usually took 15 minutes, but Saturday night traffic would say otherwise; he hit it by 9:45. His GPS’s ETA crept up, from 9:55 to 9:56 to 9:57. He was going to start the night from behind, but maybe that would only raise the stakes for what was yet to come.

The viewing was going to be a wash. It was cool to see his cousins, and some of his friends came down to say hi. For the most part, though, it was adults Cody didn't remember telling him how he was "this tall" the last time they had seen him. It was the indoctrinated condescension that was not going to stop even into Cody's upperclassman years.

Then, a young woman came up to him. She was tan with a rounder nose. Maybe Thai or Vietnamese. Most importantly, she was attractive. Her youth lit up the room.

"Hey, Cody," she said. "Do you remember me?"

"I feel like I should."

"I'm Teresa."

Teresa lived on the same block as Nonna and Nonno. He would go over to her house and play Bop-It, or they would go to his grandparents' and play the pinball machine. She was a year older; she might as well have been his babysitter.

One day, they went down into Nonna and Nonno's basement. "Leave the lights off," she said as they walked down the stairs. She took him past the pinball machine and behind the couch, which obscured them from the sightline of the stairs. They sat down.

"I got new lip gloss," she said. "Do you want to try?"

He didn't know if she meant that he would kiss her or put the lip gloss on himself. "Okay."

She kissed him. She tasted like sugar. He had seen the characters in cartoons who perk their lips out three feet in front of them. There was something silly about that, so he kept his lips soft and just made contact with her lips.

“You’re a good kisser,” she said. She backed away. “Do you want to see my breasts?” She laid down and lifted up her shirt. Her chest looked softer than his, especially the nipples. She pulled it back down.

“Can I see your vagina?” he said. She pulled down her pants and underwear. It looked like a line. “Okay.” She pulled them back up. She kissed him again. He was afraid she could feel his heartbeat from his lips.

The basement door opened. Cody stood up. Nonna walked down. “Everything okay?” she asked.

“Teresa just needs to rest,” Cody said.

Cody’s memories of his Nonna were accentuated by the blurriness of childhood. The one that stuck out was a recurring memory. He would play computer games like “Pajama Sam” or “Putt Putt Saves The Zoo” while she watched. After thirty minutes, she would say “okay. Time for a nap.”

“Can I play some more?” Cody asked.

“After your nap.” Cody took out the CD-ROM, put it into the case, and took it with him into the bedroom. The sound of wind chimes outside relaxed him. They got into bed, and he held the cd case tight. “Go seepy seepies,” she said. They looked into each other’s eyes. “Go seepy seepies.”

Things got different when Cody went to UConn. He saw his grandparents less often. That past summer, Cody only visited them once, based on his mother's request. It was his mother who was the real Nonna fan. She was her mom, after all. It was a different dynamic. And it was a different dynamic for Alex, too, who was only 18. She felt closer to him. Cody was 22. He had her all his childhood and adolescence into early adulthood, and it was an appropriate time to move on.

Little did Cody know that moving on would involve revisiting his past. That past was Teresa. Their sexual history made seeing her feel like seeing an ex-girlfriend. Or maybe a drunken one night stand was more apt, given that childhood is 11 years of acting like you're drunk.

Teresa friended him on Facebook that night. Cody had imagined that, when she moved away circa 15 years ago, she really moved. Like, she was living in Washington state or something. But her Facebook said she was living in Milford. Maybe she came back. They definitely didn't go to high school together. The bottom line was that they were in the same town, and they had each other's contact information.

She messaged him.

Hi Cody. It was nice to see you again

You, too. So you're back in Milford?

Yeah im a preschool teacher

Nicee. Yeah, I'm a senior at UCONN.

Wow you're already graduating?

Well let me know when you're around

We can get drinks at Dino's

A hasty search showed that Dino's was a Bar & Grill in New Haven, "named after the bar referenced in Thin Lizzy's 'The Boys Are Back in Town.'" The Google portfolio said "great cocktails" and "comfort food." Given that and its proximity to Yale's campus, it was probably a college bar.

Was that a neutral setting for two young people to get drinks, or was it a date? Cody didn't like to use the word "date" when asking girls out. He had opted for "go out for dinner" usually, more vague but more cool. Now, he had realized the significance of using the word. Because Teresa didn't say "date," he had little indication of her intentions.

There was the dichotomy of date and two young people getting drinks, but the intentions of the night may just be a third option. He surmised this was a way for them to get to know each other again. There was a lot to catch up on, anyway. If things went well, he could officially ask her out. In trade terms, it wasn't a job, and it wasn't volunteer work; it was an internship.

But it probably wasn't good to show up late to your internship on your first day. Not only did Cody arrive at the bar at 10:05. There was no parking lot, so he had to scourge the streets of New Haven for parking on a Saturday night. After a couple minutes, he panicked and shelled out \$10 at a garage.

He sped walked to the bar, rehearsing lines. It was between "I'm sorry; I had some family stuff to take care of," and "I'm sorry; traffic was horrible." He went for the latter, given that the former implied indirectly blaming his dead Nonna for his

tardiness. Going on an internship-date on the day of her funeral was morally dubious enough. Might as well retain as much integrity as you have left.

Dino's Bar & Grill started as a Grill and gradually became a Bar the farther down you went. You can see the booths from the front windows, where some middle-aged patrons enjoyed their burgers, beers, and lack of student debt. Then, there was the bar itself, which was this huge island, a square at least 20'x10'. Cody eyed the Stella Artois on tap, but he wanted to find Teresa first, and she wasn't in the first two sections.

After the bar was a space for foosball and darts. Then, there were standing tables immediately after that. Teresa was there with a guy. He wore hair gel and an oxford shirt, too, but he also wore a wool blazer, blue chinos, and white loafers. Preppiness felt like a second language to Cody, but, to this guy, it was his mother tongue.

"Cody!" Teresa said. She was loose. Cody knew he was late, but he also doubted Teresa had gotten to the bar, gotten a drink, and struck up a conversation with that guy in fifteen minutes. He also doubted this was her first drink.

"I'm sorry; traffic was horrible." Cody said.

"Don't worry about it." She hugged him. "Cody, this is Dave. He goes to Yale." It was official: Dave was everything Cody aspired to be.

"Hey, man," Dave said. They shook hands.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Cody said.

"How do you know Teresa?"

“We go back.”

“I was neighbors with his grandparents when we were younger,” Teresa said.

“His grandmother passed away, and I saw him at the viewing.”

“Well, sorry for your loss,” Dave said.

“Thank you,” Cody said.

“But it’s good you’re still going out there and meeting with people.”

“It’s what she would’ve wanted,” Cody said. “You know, going to a bar.

Speaking of which....” Cody went to the bar. He needed a drink after that ambush.

What was Teresa expecting Cody to do: just hang out with her and Dave, who goes to

Yale? They had to be just friends if that were the case. Or say that wasn’t the case.

Would they just say hi and he fend for himself and mingle? They talked more at the viewing than they just talked there.

He had to go all the way around to the other side of the bar to find an open seat. “Stella, please,” Cody said.

“One second,” the bartender said. She was definitely a few grades above Cody in high school.

“Cody?” he heard from the left. It was Brianna Jackson; she was definitely the same grade as Cody in high school. Brianna had a small, delicate face that seemed to have matured and thrived in the past four years. People think the transition from puberty to young adulthood makes or breaks your attractiveness, but don’t sleep on the undergrad years.

“Brianna, hey.” He moved a few chairs over. She was sitting next to a girl who definitely didn’t go to high school with him. She was artificially dirty blonde. He wasn’t sure if it was blonde-turned-brunette or brunette-turned-blonde.

“This is Nicolette,” Brianna said.

“I’m Cody. How’s it going?”

“Good,” Nicolette said.

“She’s my roommate. I brought her up here for the weekend,” Brianna said.

“Seeing the great town of Milford?” Cody said.

“My boyfriend’s here, so I’m visiting him, too,” Nicolette said.

“Where are you from?” Cody asked.

“Jersey.”

“Where do you two go to school again?” Cody asked.

“St. John’s,” Brianna said.

“Nice.”

“Not really,” Brianna said.

“No one likes it there,” Nicolette said.

“But Cody, I’m sure you’re turning people’s heads at UConn,” Brianna said.

How’d she know he went to UConn?

“How so?” Cody asked.

“You said the most interesting things in Snyder’s class. Like that part in *The Great Gatsby* when the ‘within and without’ passage reminded you of how you always felt at social events? Everytime I felt that in college, I thought of you saying that.”

Cody was surprised Nicolette even remembered he was in her class; they had barely talked. Nicolette had asserted herself in the offbeat niche, fraternizing with theater kids and honors kids. Cody was always half-assing striving to be popular. He was part of the popular kids b-team, the pastiche sans the necessary extroversion.

“Well, I’m happy to have made an impact,” Cody said.

The bartender served the Stella. “It’s seven.”

Cody had to at least ride out any obligations until they ran dry. “I’m going to meet back up with my friends, but I hope to see you two around.”

“We’ll be around,” Brianna said.

Teresa had picked up a game of darts with Dave, who goes to Yale, and a more innocuous guy (he was wearing a hoodie.) The dart board had a digital tv connected to it that tallied up—or, in this case, tallied down—the scores. Each hit meant a subtraction from the total. Players one through three hovered around 200, while player four was bringing up the rear with 250.

“Need one more?” Cody asked the innocuous guy.

“Sure. You’re team three.” He wasn’t pitted back, though he was at 210, the highest of the scores in contention. It wasn’t long to identify who was at 250. Teresa chucked the darts at the board. Two hit the ground, and one stayed at the discolored periphery of the board that didn’t count for anything but still held the dart in place.

The other guys masqueraded their macho dart throws, extending their limbs like Athenian olympians. While they looked good doing it, basic technique like level

foot placement and wrist flexion were to be desired, leading to pretty but underwhelming shots.

Cody hadn't hit the dart boards often at UConn, but he had seen Carmelo Anthony play for the Knicks in high school. He adopted the flick of the wrist and the immediate recoil after the follow-through. There was even a little arc to the shot. Cody knew he didn't have the pinpoint accuracy to aim. His strategy was to crowd the bottom left corner, given that it included the most consistent mid-to-high numbers. A couple 16s and 19s later, he was ahead of the guys heading into double digits.

Dave, who goes to Yale, took the darts and immediately hit a bullseye. Still, he was only at 53. He had to hit some major winners to seal it in this turn, and the game was anything but major winners for him. He knocked in an 18 and a 13, still not enough. Then, the video board cut to a graphic that seemed straight out of a Ford Truck commercial. Big block letters "TON" smashed onto a desert floor, followed by "LOW" on top of it. This cut to a graphic that said "Player 1 Wins."

"How did he win?" Cody asked the innocuous guy. "He was still at 20-something. I was on pace to win next turn."

The innocuous guy shrugged. "It's fucking low ton, man," he said. Cody shook Dave, who goes to Yale, 's hand, downed his Stella, and hit the bathroom.

Each hallway and door crossed meant farther away from the accessible, positive part into the dire, drastic core that everyone associates hospitals with. Even

when you're at the McDonalds on the first floor, you acknowledge that someone is dying at the same time that you're biting down into a quarter pounder with cheese.

Nonno was at the ward. "Hey, boys," he said. They walked in the room. Nonna's face slouched. Her cheery expression was gone. Her right eye was slightly open. Her gown was not so much clothing as it was a tarp to cover the failing collection of organs underneath.

The heart rate monitor made a harsh alarm for a second. Cody was expecting a nurse to come in and ask "what seems to be the problem here?" But everyone knew the problem, and everyone knew there was no way to solve it.

"Guess who's here, Nonna?" mom said. "It's Cody and Alex."

Cody did what his mom told him to do. "Bye, Nonna," Cody said. He kissed her on the forehead. The kiss didn't poison him, nor was it a traumatizing sensation. It was skin on skull, just as foreheads are.

"I'm not ready," Alex said. He was crying. "I need some more time. It's not time yet."

"It's part of God's plan, sweetie," his mom said. "She'll always be with us."

Alex kissed her on the forehead. Cody put his arm around Alex.

"You did so great raising me and the grandkids," his mom said.

"It's time to go," Nonno said, "to heaven."

"Go seepy seepies!" his mom said. The alarm sounded again.

There was a last section of Dino's that Cody hadn't noticed. It was an open space that could function as a dance floor if need be. Teresa was there doing this weird dance-cum-standing snuggle with the innocuous guy, who had turned out to be ostensible in his innocuousness. Dave, who goes to Yale, was nowhere to be seen, and Cody kind of felt bad for the guy. He outschoolled, outdressed, and outplayed Cody, and even he couldn't get the girl.

That got Cody thinking. He returned to the bar to get another Stella. Sure enough, Brianna was still there, without Nicolette, to boot.

"Where's Nicolette?" Cody asked.

"She just left with her boyfriend," Brianna said.

"Is her boyfriend's name Dave, perchance?"

"Yeah." Cody mentally threw the "didn't get the girl" stuff out the window.

"You know him?"

"He's a mutual friend."

Both Cody and Brianna had rooted themselves in the preppy subdivision of the hipster crowd since they last saw each other, so talking to Brianna was like talking to himself. Indie rock bands and cynical philosophies which were usually internalized were able to get some fresh air.

Cody anticipated a life-changing night, and he got screwed at every corner. This was his chance to take that momentum back. So what if his parents were home? His parents sleep in the same room every night, and they don't need any explaining to do. What's the difference if Cody brings a girl home?

He finally used his line. “Do you want to come back to my place and check out my record collection?”

They walked out of the bar. “Do you want me to give you a ride there?” he asked.

“That’s okay. I’ll just follow you.”

“Well, I’m over here,” Cody said, motioning across the street to the garage.

“Why didn’t you just park in the parking lot?”

“What parking lot?”

“The bar parking lot.” She turned around to face a lit parking lot next to the bar.

“I’m pretty sure that wasn’t there an hour ago.”

“Give me your address, and I’ll meet you there.” She gave him her phone, Google Maps pulled up. When Cody hit the road, part of him was worried Brianna would just take off, but that worry was soon quelled when he reached his driveway to find a blue Mazda already parked there.

All the lights were off in the house. This was as expected. The downside is early to bed, early to rise for the family. Unless Cody and Nicolette got up before sunrise, they would have to face his parents.

He led her downstairs. There was a blue light tinted on the walls. Meaning, the tv on. *Marriage Story* was playing, the scene where Adam Driver sings “Being Alive” from that musical.

The front of the couch was obscured from the sightline of the stairs. Cody walked around the couch to find Alex sleeping. Even when Cody was away from college, he still had to deal with roommates.

“Alex,” Cody said. He shook him. “Alex, go to bed.” Alex shifted. “Alex, stop falling asleep downstairs.”

“Stop.”

“Alex, I have someone over. Just go to bed.”

“Alright. Quit it.” He said. Alex got off the couch. “You’re so annoying.” Alex walked past Brianna up the stairs.

“Sorry about that,” Cody said.

“Don’t be,” Brianna said. “Little brothers are the worst.”

“Can you hit the lights?” She hit the lights. There was a stereo but no record player.

“It’s still at school.”

“Your record collection?”

“Yeah. I guess I forgot it’s not always home when I am.”

“Very sneaky, Cody.”

“I really thought it was here.”

“I’m fucking with you.” They went over to the couch and sat down, almost touching shoulder to shoulder.

“You watch this yet?” Cody asked.

“Yeah; I love Baumbach. You know he almost adapted *The Corrections* into a miniseries?”

“That would be sweet.” Their shoulders touched. “So you didn’t really come here to look at my record collection; did you?” Five seconds later, he was on top of her. She opened her legs to accommodate his waist. She moaned. He was back in high school again.

Cody hung half off the couch as they laid side by side. The olefin fabric couch wasn’t conducive to naked bodies. It also wouldn’t be conducive to two people sleeping.

“You want to stay over tonight?” Cody asked.

“Okay.”

“We can stay in my room. The bed creaks, so we have to be careful.”

This was better said than done when Cody woke up with morning wood. He cuddled up against Brianna. She woke up.

“Hi,” she said.

“Hi.” He wasn’t sure if he wanted to stay there with her or if he didn’t want to leave the room. It was “already” 8:30. This was the hurdle Cody had notioned but had pushed aside in favor of more carnal pursuits at the time. Cody wished he was in *Dawson’s Creek*, and Brianna could go out the window and down the ladder. But there was only one way out. You can’t go over it. You can’t go under it. You have to go through it.

Cody walked Brianna downstairs. Cody's dad was making waffles, Alex was eating them at the counter, and Cody's mom was on her laptop at the table.

"Hey, guys," Cody said. "This is Brianna."

"Hi," Brianna said.

"We were wondering whose car was in our driveway," his mom said.

"Want some waffles?" his dad said.

"That's okay," Brianna said. "I don't eat breakfast. It was nice to meet you."

Cody walked Brianna to the driveway. After years of skirting around it, Cody's parents could now heavily imply that he has had sex. "That was awkward," Cody said.

"I mean, it was par for the course," Brianna said.

"What do you mean?"

"You invited me over. I figured you had, like, a Scandinavian family who didn't think that stuff was a big deal."

"I invited you over because it was the right thing to do."

"Just because we slept together doesn't mean I had to stay the night."

"Kind of. It's in the name."

"I didn't have to do anything. I had sex with you because I wanted to. I slept over because I wanted to."

They had had sex for maybe five minutes that night, if you count straight penetration. Why did it require so much collateral damage? It was time to pivot.

"Yeah. It was fun. Maybe we can do this again."

"At this point, Cody, I'm just trying to get home and take a shower."

“Okay. I’ll let you go then.” Cody turned around.

“Cody?” He stopped. She was going to apologize. They were going to embrace and realize their potential as a couple, and it would take off from there. This could be the most important moment of his life. He could imagine telling people “this was the most important moment of my life. Even when it was about to happen, I knew it had that potential. I was thinking of how I could tell people about the moment to come.”

Cody turned around. “Brianna?”

“Can you move your car out of the driveway? I’m backed in.”

Yeah; she was probably right in getting upset. He actually hadn’t fathomed not inviting her over, and he would have followed through if it had registered. She did bring her car with her. And when there was that awkward moment, he could have owned it and not put any blame on her.

The tragic part was that this could have budded into something. He spent so much mental energy picturing things between him and Teresa when there was little evidence to suggest that was going to happen. Then, Brianna literally had sex with him, and he wasn’t even thinking about their relationship moving forward until it was too late.

Cody backed out to let Brianna go. It was the most mechanical of farewells. It was no embrace at the train terminal. This was something family members do for each other at family events. And Cody couldn’t see Brianna, just a blue Mazda as it backed out and sped out of the cul-de-sac.

