

No Lights!

I met her at work at the ad agency. I had graduated from DePaul University, and it was my first job. I got my own office; it was small, but I could shut the door, and take a snooze. My friends from college, Kyle Krissel and Whitey Townsend, (a nickname regarding his choice of underwear) also got jobs as junior managers, but at Foote, Cone & Belding. We would meet up for lunch and sit outside at a small park in back of the Wrigley Building. There was an abundance of women there, too, and you knew what you were getting when you checked one out because it was in the hard daylight and you were sober. Our lives didn't merit much study—just consuming impressive amounts of alcohol, getting laid, and making it to work on time. It wasn't an uncommon picture to see us riding the 'L' during our morning commute with beaten-looking faces or stale beer breath emanating from us and souring the faces of nearby passengers.

Her name was Brianna (which reminded of cheese), and she did something with markers in the art department. To meet me, she used the tactic of making use of the copy machine outside of my office, while sending blatant glances my way until I noticed her. One day, very nonchalantly, using the doorframe like a piece of gymnastic equipment, she swung into my office.

"Want one?" she said, dangling a plastic baggie full of jicama in the air.

"Sure," I said. I thought it was a sliced apple.

As I chewed, she spread out a pile of artwork on my desk, and asked my opinion regarding different layouts she was drawing for some campaign. I didn't

understand why she cared what I thought because I was about ten years younger than her, and new to my job. After I thought about it, I realized that my good qualities must outweigh my inexperience. I imagined that she saw in front of her a good-looking college grad with some business acumen. I was exotic to her. And I now spent every warm weekend at North Avenue Beach playing volleyball while inadvertently getting tan and rad blonde streaks in my hair. (And I know for a fact that pasty legs and dull hair turn women off in the sack.) I glanced down at my expensive Italian shoes and knew that I she must want me. I looked just like a surfer, only well dressed.

As she blabbed on about her artwork, I quietly scanned her up and down. She was a science experiment kinda chick. I don't know what she relied on to make men like her. She looked like she just came from a Darth Vader look-a-like contest because of her helmet hair. She sported aggressively-ugly mad scientist glasses and wore maroon zombie lipstick. She dressed in clothes out of a '50s television show, and the tops of her feet were tattooed with strange ghost-like creatures. Nothing about her required translation, she wanted you to notice her. Her ugliness forced me to look at her; it wasn't fair. Although, I must give myself a point for maturity because I took her in with a sense of oddity *and* attraction. It made my gut wrench to look at her while having a slight boner at the same time. It even got to a point, when she was in my office, I wanted to take off her crusty high heels one at a time, pin her down on the couch and do her.

As she became more comfortable with me, she would saunter into my office, and collapse onto my couch. One day from under her arm she pulled out the first

chapter of her book. Earlier that morning, I overheard her telling someone using a lowered and serious tone that she was a writer. The word *writer* suggested to me that I would be held hostage by a consort of jackasses having boring conversations about carpal tunnel syndrome and writer's block. I hoped the time would never come when she would ask me to read something of hers. I even made it clear to her that I only watched TV, and *never* read books, (which was the truth). I smiled to myself at the thought of the altered reality that Brianna must have created for herself by going around and claiming to be a writer.

I ended up being forced to read the first chapter. She'd left a big fatty for me inside the manuscript's envelope, and I knew I'd feel guilty about smoking the joint without reading her stuff first. It turned out to be 60 pages of just what I suspected she would write about: her period, ex-boyfriends, the search for a husband, the cuddliness of her pet, Mr. Patches the cat, and the witless adoration and defense of tofu. She also wrote about bookstores being homey, comfy, and not lonely. I imagined her sleeping on a cot in the backroom of a bookstore, cuddling up to *War and Peace* to fall asleep, and then taking a whore's bath in the sink of the employee washroom in the morning.

On a killer humid Chicago summer day, the guys and I were sitting outside at the park, trying not to sweat all over our lunches. From the corner of my eye, I noticed Brianna coming out of the door of McDonald's. I gazed down at my food, trying to avoid her, but I had to look up when Whitey saw her, and began to make fun of the way she looked.

"Oh, there's one for Kyle. She's your type, right, man?"

Kyle slammed Whitey in the arm and said, "Douchebag."

"Well, at least you got her name right," Whitey said, while tearing into a hot turnover, then quickly spitting out a pile of steaming cherries.

Brianna came closer and closer to me like a lion stalking its prey. I had never noticed it before but she was slightly pigeon toed, and had muscular arms like a guy. Finally, she was standing in front of me.

"Hi, Chad," she said.

I sensed that Whitey and Kyle were surprised that she knew me.

"S'up?" I said flicking my chin out at her.

She looked at Whitey and the red pile of mush on the ground between his ankles. She grimaced with disgust, and then turned her attention back to me.

"Wanna hang tonight?" she said.

"I'm pretty busy," I said.

Kyle put his hands up like he's testifying. "Not with us he's not."

"Oh, he's busy all right. Not!" said Whitey.

She got a marker out of her purse, pulled it apart with her mouth, and wrote her address on the inside of my forearm.

"Come by around seven," she said while hitting the top of her marker a couple of times to put the cap back on. "We can have some beers." She walked away swinging her bag of food happily at her side.

"Bite me," I said turning toward the guys.

"What? You don't have to go," said Whitey. "Dude, just don't show up."

"But," Kyle paused. "I would go if I were you."

“Get outta here,” I snapped.

“If you don’t go, she’ll think you’re a flamer,” Kyle said.

“Oh, dude, he’s right. You better go and straighten things out. Be sure to bring some protection!” Whitey said, pumping his crotch in the air.

“You guys are hosers,” I snarled as I stood up. I picked up Whitey’s milkshake and drop-kicked it. It made me laugh watching Whitey try to salvage it.

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I got to her apartment in Wrigleyville around 7:30. She answered the buzzer a few seconds after I rang it. I heard her voice from a window above me, and when I looked up I only saw a disappearing shock of white hair escaping back into the window.

After two flights of stairs, I stood at her front door, and caught myself sighing. Before I could knock, she opened it.

“Hi,” she said. “Come on in.”

I stayed silent because I might be expected to say something nice about her new hair. She had dyed it blond, but it looked like a white startling mass of cotton candy.

“Nice hair,” I said, unable to control myself. As I followed her into the living room, I became acutely aware of all of my actions. In fact, I started to narrate my movements in my mind: scratch my head under my baseball cap, rub my elbow, sniff, swallow, swallow again, cough slightly, hoist my jeans up, and adjust my balls.

“Have a seat,” she said pointing at an old couch.

“What?” I said, surprised.

“Relax. Take a load off.”

Every spare inch of her apartment was covered in Cubs memorabilia. I found myself cornered by a life-size cutout of Steve Stone and a garden gnome dressed in a miniature Cubs uniform. Her cat, Mr. Pat Patches, leaped noiselessly onto the table, its tail flicking against a tiny Christmas tree decorated exclusively in Cub ornaments, causing them to clatter. It made my eyes water to look anywhere in the room except into the palms of my hands.

“Wanna beer, Chad?” she asked.

I lifted my head up in relief, and said yes, only to have my attention pulled away. Above the fake fireplace on the mantel was a shrine, an altar, a claptrap built to honor baseball’s great broadcaster, Harry Caray. It looked like some kind of pseudo-religious pulpit that she probably created in a psychotic frenzy after the 19—1 loss to the Phillies in 1986. Before Brianna went into the kitchen, she lit a candle and the whole thing became a flickering baseball horror show. The beloved, white-haired, broadcaster, always adorned in his trademark wide-rimmed glasses, known and loved by baseball fans across the country, now gave me the creeps. I looked away in fear like a little girl, making Mr. Patches hiss at my sudden movement.

Brianna came back into the room and handed me a beer.

“Nice place,” I said.

She looked around. “Yeah. I’ve only been here a year,” she said, and slugged back a gulp of beer.

“Cool,” I said.

“I used to live at 4054 West 18<sup>th</sup> Street,” she said, and then sighed, “but it was too far from Wrigley Field. I’m sure you can tell that I’m an impassioned fan of the Cubs,” she said cheerfully, then punched at a pillow with a Cubs logo on it. “How about you?”

“How about me what?”

“Do you like the Cubs?”

“Sure, of course,” I said.

“Phew,” she said, and wiped her brow in mock exaggeration. “I thought you might be a White Sox fan.”

I laughed, feeling a bit more comfortable. “What for?”

“Yeah, what for?” she laughed along with me. “How about drugs?”

“Drugs?”

“Yeah. Drugs. Do you do ‘em?” she asked.

“Why? Do you have some pot?”

“No, that’s boring!” she said swiping her hand in the air while walking over to a desk. She opened a drawer and pulled out a pink business card. She handed it to me while finishing off her beer.

I examined the card. The words Mr. Ecstasy were embossed in the middle printed in swirly lettering. Below it was a phone number.

“Have you ever done Ecstasy?” she asked, her voice loaded with enthusiasm, as she grabbed the card back.

“Sure,” I lied.

“Wanna do it again?”

“Sure. Why not?”

She got up and went into her bedroom. I could hear a muffled phone conversation. When she came out, she was stuffing money into her bra.

“Drink up, we gotta go,” she said, playfully kicking my foot. I downed my beer, and followed her out the door.

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To get the Ecstasy, I had to drive us all the way out to Oak Park. Brianna didn't have a car, and didn't want to take the 'L'. Mr. Ecstasy's apartment seemed normal. After Brianna gave him the money, he handed over a tiny envelope and told us to have fun. Brianna shook it like a box of candy. He asked us to stay and to listen to a song on his guitar that he had written, but Brianna made up some excuse about having cramps. On our way back to the city, she wanted to stop for vegetarian tacos, and then asked if I would swing by a currency exchange so she could pay her electric bill, and then snapped her fingers when she remembered we needed to pick up her clothes at the 24-hour laundromat. We finally ended up at a club called Gingerman's on Rush Street. It was packed with a good-looking crowd. I noticed that Brianna really liked to dance. Although, her karate-like jabs, high kicks, and hip swirls looked as if she had just been released from a mental institution. She really lacked the *style* of the other dancers, but I decided to give her a pass because she seemed to be enjoying herself. I must admit that I was having fun, too. I liked sitting at the bar, having a beer, and watching everybody vibrate across the floor to the B-52s. Every once in a while, Brianna would make her way over to me and try to pull me out on the dance floor, but I told her I needed more beers.



“Drink lots of water because Ecstasy can dehydrate you,” Brianna shouted in my ear. I told her that beer has lots of water in it and not to worry. She shrugged her shoulders, then placed another half of a pink pill in my hand, and I took it.

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“I think you just needed to drink more water. Dancing can dehydrate you,” Brianna said.

I opened my eyes to the sound of her voice, but really didn't see anything except for darkness. I got the uneasy feeling that I was trapped in a dungeon. After a few seconds, a glowing neon light from a sign drew my gaze upward. I realized that I was sitting on the last step of a dank delivery staircase that went down into the basement of a bar. The ground looked as if it had rained in the past few hours.

“I was dancing? Was I any good?”

Brianna ignored me. “Isn't Ecstasy great?” she said, jumping up and down and imitating a bunny. She stuck her front teeth out in front of my face, and began to chomp. “You look like a carrot to me!”

I reached my arms out in front of me and noticed that I was wearing her orange angora sweater. Sorrowfully, I ran my fingers over it. I looked a little further down and saw a stain that looked like I pissed my pants. Brianna stopped hopping and stared at me.

“Oh, yeah. I had to take you to the bathroom.”

She paused, and then shouted, “Let's dance!” Brianna took her glasses off and began to pulsate in front of me. Her bare face allowed me to totally see her eyes for the first time and their color startled me. As I looked into them, I got the sensation of

a breezy sunny day at Wrigley Field and the rarified experience of looking up and seeing a cloudless blue sky. My heart clenched with love for her.

“Brianna?”

“Yes?”

“Will you marry me?”

“I’ll think about it.” She paused and tapped her finger against her pursed lips.

“Okay, but the wedding can’t be next Tuesday because I have Jazzercise class.”

“Okay,” I said, “Brianna?”

“What is it now?”

“Well, it’s just that I’m not sure if there’s a god.”

“Who cares? It’s just a detail,” she said, and started to play with my hair. A burning irritation rose from inside of me. I couldn’t believe that I let her get to me, and that I needed her validation. I wanted to get up and walk away and forget all about this Ecstasy adventure, but instead I started to cry and not a little bit. I cried just like the time in Little League baseball when I got hit in the head with a bat. The waterworks ran off my chin like a river, down my neck and chest, helping to douse the anger rising from me. I urgently wanted to tell her that I loved her, but thankfully my words were axed by my sobs. I buried my face in the sleeve of her orange sweater.

“Oh, boy,” said Brianna, and petted my head like I was her cat.

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Brianna drove us back to her apartment. I envied the unfazed command she had over the Ecstasy and her ability to maneuver around the city like a taxi driver.

All of *my* sensations were still heightened, and apparently I couldn't even handle driving or taking a piss on my own.

She brought me straight into her bedroom. It had a soupy haze of sexual energy as if someone had just been there. I practically had to push the air out of my way to get to the bed, which was covered with an old quilt with a faded photo of Bill Buckner on it. I reached into my pocket and fingered a condom before plopping down. I was happy that I was alert enough to know to kick my shoes off and to unzip my pants as a beginning to sex. I felt Brianna enter the room and drift over me like a ghost. I finally caught her, and brought her close to my chest to kiss her. She tasted like beer. Something about her felt different from what I expected, especially when I couldn't find her boobs. When she pressed into me, her bones felt doughy, and she had a gravelly quality to her, especially her skin. When she came, she yelled out, "Home run!" instead of the standard womanly moan. The room was dark, and for a moment, my attention was drawn to a blade of light coming through the edge of the curtain from the street. I could see the very top of Wrigley Field. It shocked me to think that someday there might be lights at Wrigley Field, and that the fans would attend night games. I remembered Brianna wore a pin on her jacket that read, "No Lights!" I realized that I'd suddenly lost track of doing the deed, and in fact, Brianna wasn't even underneath me anymore. My head turned to catch a wisp of white hair and a strangely aged backside, disappearing out of the bedroom.

"Brianna," I called out frightened, but she didn't answer. A chill ran up my spine and spooked me. I grabbed my clothes and flew out of her apartment. I felt my

situation pass into a hopeless state as I found myself stumbling along Addison Street, shoeless, and trying to wave down a taxi.

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I still was in a faint trance on Monday at work, even after the Ecstasy wore off. I had yet to see Brianna. My thoughts were fixated on her over the entire weekend. At lunch, I picked up a rose to give to her, and as I walked back into my office, Brianna was standing behind my desk, placing a paper bag down on my chair. She seemed disappointed that I had caught her.

“Shoes,” she said in an apologetic kind of way. I was grateful that she returned them because my grandma had bought them for me on her trip to the Amalfi Coast.

“Who needs ‘em?” I joked, and waited for her to laugh. She just shrugged her shoulders. She tried to step around me, but we ended up bumping into one another. She offered to me a consolation by giving me a quick hug and a pat on the back.

“Well, see ya,” she said and slinked out of my half-closed door. I managed to lightly catch her by the arm.

“Hold on, gorgeous. Where are you going?” I said, trying to sound light hearted.

“Oh, just back to work. I’m kinda busy today.”

I looked at her and wondered how many more guys had succumbed to her promised night of fun with Ecstasy. My pulse tightened and I started to feel embarrassed.

“What happened the other night?” I asked, feeling my face flush.

Brianna pressed her lips together and didn't respond. I could tell that she was going to be a real miser with any direct answers, so I decided to man up and ask her directly. I gave her an expectant look.

"Was I with...you?"

"Of course. Who else would it be?" she said as though pleased by her own question. "You just had a bad trip, Chad. That's all." Brianna held her hand out in front of her and examined her nails. She seemed to know something that I didn't.

I pointed to her feet. "But I don't remember seeing—"

She interrupted me, "I always wear my socks to bed, Chad." Brianna rocked back and forth, then looked down at her tattooed feet, and scrunched her toes. I could tell that she was smiling a bit, and there was a split second when I thought she was going to tell me that I banged someone else—a guy, no less. Adrenaline coursed through me as I waited for an answer. I let out a small painful laugh and so did she.

"Well, I can only hope you had a good time," she finally said after a long pause.

"Oh, yeah, the stuff is great," I said trying to match her casual tone while playfully squeezing her arm. "And you?"

"I didn't do any Ecstasy."

"What did you say?" I said after a few confused beats.

Brianna broke out of my grip, and walked away while saying again to me, "I didn't do any Ecstasy." I caught the last glimpse of her cotton candy hair as she disappeared around the corner.

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I turned that night over and over again in my brain for years, until one day it disappeared, and I couldn't remember the exact details of it anymore. I think it might be because I met my wife, who is carefree, blonde, and athletic. Having her around balances out anything that happened in the past. It's like looking at a brand-new version of myself only, in female form. She works in advertising, too, but not in some artsy way, she's in marketing and does research on consumption patterns.

It had been ten years since I'd seen Brianna. She left the agency shortly after our night of Ecstasy, but there was no mistaking her that day on the beach. I recognized her right away—who rides a bike with a cocktail dress on? Her hair was dyed back to black and cut in a bowl, and her tattooed feet gave me confirmation. She had stopped to drink some water. I was genuinely happy to see her, so I waved. She didn't wave back. Worried that she didn't see me, I rode my bike over to her. After all of the time that had passed, I'm sure she had been wondering what happened to me, maybe searched for me, or even missed me. I hoped that we could go for a drink, and I would have the chance to fill her in on how good my life has been going.

"Hey, you—remember me?"

"Excuse me?" she asked, looking over her shoulder then back at me.

"It's me, Chad. From the ad agency."

"Ah, sorry, I don't know you," she said as she tossed her water bottle into the trash.

"How can you not know me?"

"It's easy," she said getting back on her bike.

“Hey, come on. Brianna, stop joking,” I said.

“That’s not my name anyway,” she said as she rode away, picking up speed.

Her voice drifted away, but I swear I heard her say, “Follow me.”

I trailed after her along the crowded lakefront most of the afternoon, until I lost track of her when the sky grew dark. I turned around and headed back toward my house. As I got closer to my home on Addison Street, I heard a ball crack against a bat and then the crowd roar. I looked up to see the lights shining brightly over a baseball game at Wrigley Field.