

TWO YOUNG LOVERS

My world had collapsed around me and I was in a very confused place. I didn't know what to do. My girlfriend and I had been through many experiences together and grown incredibly close. I felt we were perfect for each other, but then something upsetting happened and now she was gone. And as I drove on a highway and contemplated on what had happened and what I was going to do about it - an appropriate song on the radio played - Jimmy Buffett's *Margaritaville*, "...some people claim that there's a woman to blame, and I know it's my own damn fault."

But was it was my own damn fault? I didn't cause the fracas at our jubilant Super Bowl party. I was minding my own business when the fury happened. She was sitting comfortably next to me on the sofa, both of us enjoying a beer and delightfully watching the Super Bowl. Then in the next minute, I was involved in a violent confrontation with my roommate Chichi, my so-called best friend. And as I saw it, he was the one that was out of control. It was just my fault that I didn't say or do something about his drug addiction.

Nonetheless, I had a remedy for these troubles - I had my catharsis – and that was to drive and get away. I drove north on California Route 1 (Pacific Coast Highway) towards Northern California. I steered my three year old 1987 Jeep Cherokee past a parade of cars and big-rig trucks. The road zigzagged, twisted, and rambled among the cliffs. The views of the Pacific Ocean were picturesque. It felt great to drive on the open highway; even the simple things, like getting a bite to eat were enjoyable. I stopped for breakfast near sunny Pismo Beach.

I mulled for a solution to my girlfriend dilemma as I ate breakfast, a blueberry Belgian waffle with mocha coffee. A whiff and a taste of the roasted beans invigorated me with a purpose on what to do to get my pretty girl back. I finished my meal, paid, and left the restaurant. I knew what I wanted to do. I wasn't going to let the woman of my life slip away from me. I poured out too much of my emotional cup on her to let this happen.

I went outside, found a telephone booth, and dialed a San Francisco area code. There was only one person in this world that I could turn to, my boss, Bill Schafer, the owner of a prosperous flooring company. If this successful businessman couldn't provide me with some pearls of wisdom to get Aracely back then I lost her forever.

“Cheech, what prompted you to call me on this beautiful Monday morning?” Bill said.

“Well, there are so many things going on - I don't even know where to begin.”

“Let your heart speak my boy. Papa Bill is listening.”

“Sir, I lost my girl. I got a little drunk at my super bowl party. I got into a fight with my roommate, and she didn't like it and then she broke up with me. She's in Utah

right now, and I wanted to see if you could help me put a plan together before she comes back. Do you think you can you help me?" I said.

"Drinking and fighting?"

"Yes, it got ugly."

"Sorry to hear that. But it sounds as if this confrontation could have been avoided."

"It wasn't my fault. There was this other guy, my roommate, he was on drugs."

I heard Bill scratching his beard. "Were you doing any drugs?"

"A little cocaine."

"Cheech, don't think your use of alcohol and drugs might have something to do with this altercation?"

We went back and forth about the benefits of quitting drinking, doing drugs, and seeking a healthier lifestyle. My heart sank and my fear rose on the prospects on what this might require. My mind raced with what I could lose. It felt as if I would have to sacrifice my left hand, foot, or testicle?

I thanked Bill for his insight and hung up the telephone. So far, he had been the only one who had offered me any advice on getting my girl back. Everyone else felt I should move on. But I didn't want anyone else; I wanted to tie the knot with her. Yet, I wasn't convinced I needed to change in order to get her back. I knew that once I spoke with him face to face I'll make him see my point of view, he'll understand.

It seemed that the road was my best friend; sometimes it provided the answers to my troubles. I just had to drive long enough for the answer to come. I came prepared. The back of my Jeep was packed with clothes and things for a three day weekend. Bill had

given me some time off to get my act together. This was my usual routine; shit happens - get out of town, clear my head, and recharge my batteries.

Back home, I hugged and said goodbye to my parents, who appeared concerned. They had taken me in after my fight with my roommate. For this, I would be eternally grateful. Like everyone else they felt I should part with Aracely and move on, but I couldn't do that. I felt that after two years together our heart strings were too attached.

But there were other strings I would cut. I would sever my relationship with my ex-roommate, the methamphetamine addict Chichi. No longer would I listen to his lies, ridicule, and bullying. Damn him for thinking he's the only coca cola in the desert. Why had I been so blind, and for so long? I needed this trip to get away, far away. I got back on the highway and ventured northward.

I thought of Aracely as I drove on PCH. The drive reminded me of when we went to see the Rams vs. 49ers playoff game in San Francisco. These were memories I held dear to my heart. I wanted to mend our relationship to create new memories. I wanted to grow old together.

I got off the highway and entered San Francisco. I drove along an avenue lined with cafes and pizza joints. Families with their dogs strolled along the sidewalk. I imagined a future where one of those families could be me with Aracely - and who knows, maybe with a little one strolling next to us.

My future depended on me making all the right decisions for the next couple of days. I parked in front of Bill's flat and searched for the man of the hour. The air was

crisp and smelled of pine. I came up to the door and knocked. No answer. I knocked and again, no answer. I began to get anxious.

Then I recalled he liked to exercise in the park, and sure enough there he was. He was performing Qigong with a group of fellow practitioners. He led a group of a dozen disciples in gentle meditative movements. He could have been an ancient philosopher among his students; Plato, Pythagoras, or Aristotle.

I made my way over to the park, a vast one thousand acre oasis in the city. I watched them practice traditional Chinese exercises in this horticultural, diverse garden. I felt calm as I watched their ballet of meditative movements. Ten minutes later they finished. Bill recognized me and excused himself from the group.

His slim frame approached me. “Good to see you my friend,” Bill said. His bright blue eyes and smile put me at ease as we shook hands. Then he led me to his flat’s porch to sit on a chair. In front of us, lay the park with its joggers, families, and songbirds. I could live and be happy here for the rest of my days.

“So what brings you here?” Bill said.

“My girl, Aracely.”

“Men would be lonely creatures in this world without a woman by their side.”

I explained to Bill that I came up north to get away for the weekend, to unwind. And also, I wanted to stop by to see if he could offer me more advice on mending my relationship with Aracely. “If you want to rekindle your relationship with this young lady, which it sounds like this is what you want to do; then you need to grow as a person in a most profound way.”

“Sir, I just want to get my girl back.”

Bill and I argued for over an hour about responsibility and my lack of it until I realized he was right. I hadn't taken responsibility for my actions. He said he admired my work ethic, but outside of work I dropped the ball. And he was right. After work, and sometimes during work (but I never told him), I clouded my mind with alcohol and marijuana. This led me to make irrational decisions and commit irresponsible actions. Finally, I realized I did need help.

“Cheech, if you don't mind me saying this, it seems that you are on a downward spiral. And this downward spiral, which leads to misery and despair, is something that only you can save yourself from. You might want to look at entering a recovery program,” Bill said.

My eyes moistened, my emotions were getting to me. “Damn it's hard to admit when you're wrong,” I said.

“That's OK. This is the first step, admitting that you need help. The next step is to change your attitude. And once you change the way you think then you're surroundings will change as well. I've seen it happen.”

This wasn't how I envisioned my meeting with him was to take place. I expected him to see it my way, make a simple recommendation, and then I would get my girl back. But no - the burden had been placed where it belonged - on me.

“Cheech, begin by saying to yourself - I am sober,” Bill said.

In the morning, Bill took me to go eat breakfast. I ate a vegetarian sausage, baked beans, hash browns, grilled tomatoes, and fried mushrooms. I thanked him for the breakfast, his advice, and for letting me spend the night. He gave me the telephone

number to a recovery place in Los Angeles and urged me to call them as soon as I got back to the big city. I assured him I would. I dropped him off at his flat and then bade him farewell and headed south on the freeway. One mile went by before I pulled over to the shoulder and stopped.

Once again, my mind raced with the decisions I had to make. They weighed heavily on me. I knew I had to seek counseling for my alcoholism; this was inevitable. I didn't like it, but it was something I had to do. And as much as I hated the thought getting help it was the right thing to do.

Then the devil spoke to me. I should resist Bill's recovery recommendation. I didn't need this kind of advice, nor did I want anyone's help. I could do this on my own. And what's with this tree hugger philosophy - "change your attitude," he said. Screw him, this guy wasn't that smart. But then I recalled that alcohol and drugs were like Kryptonite to me, and under their influence I had become weak - thus, I stopped listening to the devil and threw him under the bus.

But before I got started I wanted to see Aracely, let her know I was serious about getting help for this disease. However, she wasn't home; she was in Utah. There was nothing to do, but wait for her return. But I didn't want to go home and wait. I wanted to keep going. I surveyed my map. My trip from Los Angeles to San Francisco had been five hundred miles. What's another seven hundred miles, especially to see someone I love? And to boot, exploring was in my blood; so, I went to Grantsville Utah. My recovery would have to wait.

Halfway to Grantsville, I experienced the worst winter storm of my life. The wind and snow bucketed my Jeep as I drove east on Interstate 80. The winds were in excess of forty miles an hour; mountains of snow gave me poor visibility in all directions. It was then that I wished I was back home savoring a warm waffle and a hot coffee.

I parked at a gas station in Wendover, Utah - where it seemed I was in the heart of the storm. I entered the store. "Where are you from?" a female gas attendant asked.

"California," I said.

"That figures." She looked at me as if I was from Mars: I wore sneakers, jeans, and a thin, long-sleeved shirt - dressed for mild Northern California weather, but here in western Utah it was minus thirty and in blizzard conditions. Inside the store, I purchased thermals, a thick sweater, and wool socks. I put them on in the restroom and then returned to my Jeep. I put on a beanie and gloves that I remembered were in the glove box. I filled up with gas and then got back in my truck. The cold was such that my fingers felt as if someone had beaten them with a hammer.

I drove east, past the Bonneville Salt Flats on a straight-as-a-arrow highway. The road was slippery. I kept it under forty-five miles an hour for the next one hundred miles in what many consider to be the loneliest road in America. A curtain of snow surrounded my Jeep - considerable snow blew and drifted in front of me - the visibility was almost zero. Nothing existed beyond me except the dry salt lake and the distant mountain ridges that I couldn't see.

Ninety minutes later, and after a total of twelve hours of driving from San Francisco, I finally drove into Grantsville. It was almost midnight. I was glad I didn't miss the exit in the dark - the Guinness book of records states that this stretch of highway

is the worst for missing exits. I drove through Main Street and searched for lodging. Any motel would do, but to my dismay, I found none.

I stopped and rolled down my window to ask someone leaving a saloon where I could find a motel. “Tooele, you have to go to Tooele to get a room,” the stranger in a trench coat said. Why Tooele, I thought. What’s wrong with Grantville? I didn’t want to argue, I was exhausted, and so I drove another fifteen minutes to Tooele.

The Villa Motel was the first motel I saw in the town of Tooele. A young woman with blue hair greeted me inside the bricked house. She registered me and then gave me a room key. I thanked the young woman and left. An outside corridor led me to my room; the cold went right through me. I opened the room, turned on the heater, and then collapsed on the bed.

In the morning, my nose hairs froze as I stood outside an alcohol beverage control building. I was thirsty and had gone outside to get something to drink and found this place. And inside this place I knew I could get whatever drink I wanted. I stared at the alcohol signs, knowing I better get inside somewhere and quick.

Someone walked by me. “They got better things over here,” a man wearing a parka said. He walked into a nondescript building with a sign posted outside the clubhouse: Tooele Beginners. I shuffled across the snow and entered the building and warmed up by a heater. I then sat in a meeting. There I was, barely over the legal age limit, admitting to the world about my drinking problem. How low have I sunk? After the Alcoholic Anonymous meeting, I left for Grantsville. I still didn’t know how would I search for Aracely, or what would I say once I found her?

I arrived in Grantsville and just as in Tooele, the snow blanketed the whole town, and the cold bit just as bad. The radio kept announcing not to go outdoors unless you had to and not for longer than fifteen minutes. I didn't realize there was a peril to Utah's slogan: *the greatest snow on earth*.

Seven times I drove up and down Main Street. The town, with a population of 4,464, was small. But she could be anywhere, or she might not be here at all - maybe even returned home to Los Angeles. What was I thinking in coming up here? Furthermore, what sane person would venture out in this weather? I pulled up to a gas station called Maverick's. I got out and went into the store to pay for the gasoline. A frozen cat lay near the entrance to the store; icicles clung to its mouth.

Cheech drove down the street. Yet, I didn't see him. I closed my eyes and then opened them as I sat in the rental car and adjusted my bra. My parents had gone inside the store to use the restroom. We had just left my grandmother's house and were on our way to the airport. I put on lip gloss. Then I turned to admire the white driven snow on the field across the street and reflected on how pretty Utah can be. It was then that I thought I recognized a truck. The truck was coming up the street. It was raised with thick, wide tires, just like his. But that was impossible; he was still back in Los Angeles. The truck then pulled into the gas station and parked next to me. It was a spitting image of his white Jeep Cherokee. I thought what a coincidence. But then I looked into the truck - and to my astonishment - I saw him. My jaw dropped. What the hell was he doing here?

My ex-boyfriend, Cheech, got out of his truck, shuffled across the gas station, and then entered the store. He looked underdressed for the weather. Most people over here

had three or four layers of clothing; in contrast, he looked like he only had two. He tried to pay for the gasoline, but the gas attendant wouldn't take his money. No doubt the attendant was probably telling him he has to fill up first. The dummy was trying to do business as if he were still in the big city.

Cheech picked up a newspaper and then stepped outside. That's when I got out and waited for him. I had my hoodie on. He would have to recognize me with it on. There was no way I was bringing it down, not in this weather. He flipped the newspaper and continued to read it as he walked past me. He didn't even bother to look up.

I turned around. Maybe he'll see me now? He put the gasoline nozzle in his Jeep and returned to reading his newspaper. I went over to see what was so important about reading that damn newspaper that he hadn't noticed me. He was reading the weather report, at least it wasn't sports. I better say something before I freeze my tits off, otherwise, I might never find out why he's here.

"Hello," I said.

"Hmmm," he said. He looked puzzled, as if I caught him daydreaming.

"Cheech, what are you doing here?" I now stood next to him.

"Aracely!" He finally took notice of me and tried to make a friendly conversation.

But I wasn't interested in being nice. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for you."

"You walked right past me. I stood right there," I said and pointed. "Why are you looking for me?"

"I wanted to say hello."

“You came all the way from Los Angeles and drove through a blizzard to say hello to me in Utah in minus 25-degree weather?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but yes.”

“You’re beyond redemption,” I said. Yet, for some strange reason I remained standing out in the cold with him. Weird, I know, but I wasn’t done. “You can’t be doing this to me, again. I’m not going to take it.”

“Aracely, on the strength of this heart (he pointed to his chest) I’m going to kick this habit.”

“Why didn’t you wait until I got back home to tell me this? Who does this?”

“I do. You’re my soul mate, and I love you, and I’m not letting go of you.”

I stared at him for a moment. I never heard him say that before. I’m the one who says soul mate. Yet, something inside me stirred, but I wasn’t going to let him know about it. Not after what he put me through. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Just say you love me.” He gave me this look.

I wasn’t sure if I should melt or slap him across the face. Then the wind blew and I caught a scent of him. No, I wasn’t going to melt. I’ll be strong; let him simmer. “Don’t do this. Don’t chase me anymore,” I said. Then I heard a door open. I turned around and saw my parents exit the store. They had been in the restroom when he had gone in. “I have to go. My parents will kill me if they saw me outside.”

“Are you driving home?”

What!? What was he going to do, continue to stalk me? “We’re flying,” I said. Then I got back in the car. I wanted to say more, but I couldn’t - the cold froze my jaw.

He smiled at me. I gave him a look as if he belonged in Arkham's Asylum; that will teach him for embarrassing me at *his* Super Bowl party.

My parents approached. He turned around, but I could tell he was watching them through the reflection of his Jeep's window. My parents hobbled inside the car without noticing him. We then drove off.

We boarded the flight. But before getting to our seats - my dad went straight to the restroom again - apparently something didn't agree with him. I whizzed down the aisle and sat down in coach, my mom sat next to me.

I was proud of myself. I stood up and didn't give in to Cheech. But a part of me thought that was the most incredible thing anyone has ever done for me. How crazy was that? To chase me down half-way across the country in the cold and to tell me that he loved me. Despite this, I didn't know if I could forgive him for everything he's put me through. I would have to give it time. I closed my eyes and tried to focus on the flight home and for the moment put this behind me.

"Honey, you know - I thought I saw Cheech's white jeep back at Grantsville," my mom said. "Back at the gas station."

"Really?" I know the difference when mom's fishing or testing me - and right now she was fishing. "I didn't notice; I didn't see anything."

"He doesn't have any family out here, does he?"

"No, not that I'm aware of."

My mom settled in her seat and mumbled something about Cheech being 'bonkers.' Then she turned to me and leaned in, "You're not going to get back together with him, are you?"

"No," I said. Yet, somewhere deep inside me I felt something for him; after all, he had brought me out of my shell.

"Good, because that would really unglue your dad if you did. Here he comes now. Let's drop it."

My dad flopped down on his seat, exasperated. He put on his seat belt and closed his eyes. My mom offered him something to drink, but he declined it.

The stewardess performed her flight presentation and safety checks. The seat belt sign chimed. Then the engines whirled to life and the pilot taxied us down the flight line.

I hated flying. I white knuckled the armrest for awhile before I realized I cradled my walkman. As the plane rolled down the flight line I turned on my Sony walkman and listened to a song by Nancy Sinatra, "...you keep playing where you shouldn't be playing, and you keep thinking that you'll never get burnt, well, I've just found me a brand new box of matches, and what he knows you ain't had time to learn, these boots are made for walking, and that's just what they'll do..."