

The world stopped spinning just before lunch on a Wednesday at 11:09 in the morning. I saw it coming, the hints, the signs, all that—but didn't do a damn thing about it. If I hadn't been such a dumb ass I might have been able to capitalize on the catastrophe. But that sort of thinking has never been me.

We talked about it the week before in Ms. Hunter's AP Physics class, where I sat next Jenny Mitchel. My desk was the only one bolted to the floor. I guess some hyperactive kid sat there back when that sort of thing was legal-ish. I'll tell you what though—there was no one I would rather be bolted down next to than Jenny.

According to Ms. Hunter, if the spinning stopped slowly the oceans would move to the poles and all land would merge into one gargantuan super continent. If it stopped suddenly everything not well rooted into the Earth would be smashed together and thrown off the planet at over one thousand miles per hour.

That's how I felt back in August when I saw Jenny get out of her parents' mini van after her long summer vacation. The California sun had lightened her dark brown hair just right so that it set off the silky smooth shine of her tanned skin. All signs of baby fat had vanished as well. I was entranced in the lines of her exposed midriff—how they twisted and turned as she walked down the driveway to check the mailbox, damn. All that was packed into a pair of cut-off jean shorts and a bikini top that must have been a size or two larger than the one I saw her in at the end of school swim party back in May. There wasn't a whole lot my sixteen year-old ass could have done with that kind of stimulation, except plant my feet and take that hormonal rush at one thousand miles per hour—oh yeah.

Jenny and I had been in school together since the second grade. In fourth grade she stapled my hand to the class bulletin board as an act of revenge against me for putting glue

and shaping beads in her hair the day before. At that moment I had never hated anyone more. When the small razor sharp point of the staples past through the soft webbing of skin between my thumb and index finger the anger and pain concocted a sensation inside me that felt like falling and having my hair set on fire. My feeble mind convinced itself that any woman who can make you feel like that is worth getting to know. Our relationship grew considerably from there. The fact that our bros were pretty tight helped too. They played on our high school's football team. Neither of them was particularly good, but it meant that I got to hang out with, or at least sit by, Jenny at all the games.

A week before the end I asked Jenny why she wasn't a cheerleader. Almost every night growing up the headlights from her mother's mini-van backing into their driveway after picking Jenny up from gymnastics ran across the back wall of my family's living room. Sometimes the lights were off as soon as the car stopped and I heard the doors close and the garage door shut. Sometimes they were on a bit longer. One night the lights were on for almost an hour. I just sat with my back sunk into the couch staring into the lights. That was the last time they ever crossed liked that into our living room.

"Those girls' moves are all show and no substance," she told me. "I got substance. Shit, if I'm going to get a scholarship to college it's not going to be as a spazed out, sexed up cheer dork with spanks jammed up my ass thank you." She took a big bite of her churro and smiled—bits of it stuck in her teeth and packed her cheeks. We both looked down at our brothers on the sidelines.

"You know how to get sexed up?" I said. "That's Amanda Cunningham's M.O." Every other day last semester that chick would get called out of our Honors Lit class for wearing

shorts that let her ass cheeks show or for revealing clothes that showed her bra—sometimes she didn't even wear a bra. I missed that class.

"Give her a break," Jenny said shrugging her shoulders. "She's just looking for validation."

"What?"

"Her dad's dead and her mom works six nights a week as a cocktail waitress at the strip club her sister works at. It's not like she knows a whole lot else."

"Wow, Lexi Cunningham is a stripper now and her mom works with her. Holy shit."

"Don't be a dick." Jenny bumped my thigh with her hip. "Go Tony," Jenny screamed as my brother was called in to try and block a field goal. She didn't care that cinnamon and sugar was smeared all around her mouth and her hair was a mess or that she had on her brother's old Green Day t-shirt tied in the back as she climbed right up on the front rails of the bleachers in front of a packed stadium—yelling and screaming. Right before the play went off Jenny reached down and grabbed my hand. The sugar on her fingers felt gritty as they interlocked with mine.

All of a sudden I felt everything lurch forward and drop. I must have pulled Jenny down as I fell. I just remember helping her up, still holding her hand. She gave me this look. Her dark green eyes ate me up like a fat kid taking on a corn dog after a twenty-four hour fast. The back of my head tingled like I had slept on it funny and my heart felt like it was broadcasting out of my ears. Then I knew. I knew what all those crappy poems in English class and Hallmark movies were talking about, what dating sites had made millions on supposedly helping people find, and what just about every one of my sixteen-year old peers and I laughed at. I knew I was in love. And I didn't care that she was still a bit of a

tomboy and that all the guys I had seen or heard about her dating were older and nothing like me. It didn't matter. I was holding hands with the coolest hottest girl I could have ever imagined.

"Are you okay?" Jenny asked.

"Yeah, are you okay?"

"Sure." Jenny let go of my hand slowly. "What was that?"

"You felt that too?" I asked.

"Uh, yeah. I think everyone did." Jenny's eyes looked back across the bleachers.

"Wow." People were looking around and reassuring one another. Food and drinks had spilled in the row in front of us. I looked out over the field. Players on each side were looking around shrugging their shoulders and pointing in all directions. After a couple of minutes an announcement from the booth came over the stadium PA giving the okay to keep playing.

"Go Broncos!" Jenny cheered and clapped.

I slid close beside her. Jenny kept her eyes on the game but smiled with the corner of her mouth. The ball was snapped and sure enough the offensive guard covering my bro clobbered his dumbass.

"Hey," Jenny said. "Are you going to homecoming next week?"

Of course I was, I went to every game just like her. "Probably," I said.

"What about the dance?"

"I don't know. Ricky and I might swing by with some of the guys." Ricky Barboca was my best friend. He usually went to the games but that night he was busy trying to get his dad's 1982 Stingray to run.

“Oh.” Jenny nodded. “Okay.”

#####

The next day Ricky and I stood in his hallway bathroom watching with amazement as the water in the toilet spun around for over five minutes. It swished and swished, almost splashing out of the bowl entirely at one point. We didn’t just watch the toilet, we turned on the sink and even the bathtub had a similar thing going on with it. It was pretty gnarly until we remembered what Ms. Hunter told us.

“Hey,” Ricky said. “You thinkin’ what I’m thinkin’?” There was a brief pause.

We stared down into the porcelain abyss, “END OF THE WORLD!” we said in unison.

“Damn, if the world ended right now would you have any regrets?”

“Mmmmm, no,” I said.

“None?”

“Not really.” Maybe it was the way I carelessly shrugged my shoulders, or the grin I couldn’t shake to save my life, but Ricky was on to me.

“What’s with you?” Ricky took a step back and leaned his head forward—like he was some sort of head doctor examining me. “You’ve been awfully chipper today. Like nothin’ fazes you man.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Dude, you came over this mornin’ and asked my parents how they were doin’ and then talked to them for like fifteen minutes. Who does that?”

“I was just being nice.” I shrugged again.

“Plus, all this past week you’ve been talkin’ about the world ending and shit. Non-stop, blah blah blah. But now’s the first time you’ve mentioned it and we’ve been hangin’ out since last night.”

“I guess you’re right.” He was.

“So what? You’ve come to terms with the end and realize it is just another fad, like Y2K or whatever”

“What do you know about Y2k, you were like four?” We were actually three and all I remember is sitting in a grocery cart overloaded with bottled water and Top Ramen with my dad’s portable radio blaring in the background.

“I know things.”

“Like what?”

“Like, I know I would regret not getting’ laid one more time before I bite the big one.” I couldn’t prove it, but I was pretty sure Ricky had never actually been laid.

“Whatever,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“I would regret not going all the way with Jenny Mitchel back in the day.”

“What,” I lunged forward and got in Ricky’s face backing him against the wall.

“Holy shit man, what the hell?”

“When did you get with Jenny?” Ricky may have been startled by my sudden leap of aggression, but I was completely shocked. It just came out.

“Never, we kissed back on our eighth grade trip remember? You were the look out.”

“Oh yeah.” I backed off of Ricky and patted his chest. “How the hell could you have got with her on the bus?”

“I don’t know. Shit, I was just sayin’. Come on you live right across from her. She got retarded hot over the summer.”

I squinted my eyes trying to glare at Ricky.

“What’s wrong with your face?” Ricky backed up into the hallway. “Oh shit. I get it. You like her.”

“No.”

“Ya, that’s it. You like her.” Ricky was shaking his finger at me. “Can’t say I blame you.”

“Whatever.” I gave Ricky one final shrug.

“She’s pretty cool man.” He put his arm around my shoulder as we started walking back towards the garage.

“Ya, she is.” I nodded, too embarrassed to look at Ricky.

“So, are you going to ask her out or what bro?”

Before going into the garage we both grabbed a beer from Ricky’s dad’s mini fridge in the laundry room. His old man never kept track of the Milwaukee’s Best. It was gross, thick and bitter, but did the trick and made us feel like real men working on a car.

“I don’t know.” I popped the top of my brew.

“I heard she broke up with Savage over the summer and has been single since.”

Jeff Savage was a senior. Jenny had been dating him all last spring. He was the head of the yearbook committee and played club soccer. She introduced me to him at one of the football games. He shook my hand, made some quips about the school band, but for the most part he kept to himself—tucked up in his bleacher seat all legs and lank hunched over texting. He wore designer glasses with thick black frames. My dad loved to listen to old

country and left the record sleeves around the garage. I saw one with this dude Buddy Holly. When I saw Savage for the first time I could have sworn it was Buddy reincarnate if he played in Nirvana but liked Radio Head. Around school Savage walked with his head up, always socializing with different clicks. He liked to play his guitar during lunch hour on the campus courtyard. I think he only had like two pairs of worn out jeans, which he complimented with t-shirts with slogans on them that read like bumper stickers. It was hard to dislike him, but I still thought he was an ass.

“I never got what she saw in that guy.”

“Ya, he’s pretty strange. He’s probably got a huge crank.”

“What the hell?” I threw the old FRAM air filter we had pulled earlier that morning at Ricky.

Ricky laughed and tossed the filter to the side. He reached for his beer. “You should ask her to homecoming.” Ricky took a short sip and wiped his face with the sleeve of his shirt. “That’s what I’d do anyway.”

“Hmm,” I muttered. I stared out of the garage, past the driveway thinking about what Jenny had said to me the night before.

“What?” Ricky said, pretending to look for something in the direction I was staring.

“She asked me last night.”

“Asked you what? To homecoming?”

“Not exactly. She just asked if I was going.”

“You said yes right?” Ricky leaned on the car towards me nodding his head.

“I said we might swing by.”

“Dumb ass, she was totally asking you to go with her.” He placed his beer down and put his hands out towards me as he explained. “She’s not going to straight up ask you, but she totally put it out there. Oh my god, dude.”

“Shut up, I was playing it cool.” My heart started to play in my ears again and my palms started to sweat. As my stomach spun around inside me I couldn’t help but believe Ricky was totally right.

“You’re so cool, you can probably forget it now. She thinks you rejected her.”

“Bullshit, I’ll just ask her on Monday to go.”

#####

Monday came and went. Jenny wasn’t at school. Ricky spent a good part of the day asking the couple of girls he knew if they were going to homecoming. They were nice about, especially the dark haired semi-cute freshman from his Ceramics class who told him, “I have to go antiquing with my grandmother.”

“See, I feel rejected,” Ricky said in the parking lot of the school. “I’m not even interested in her big ass, but I feel pissed that she made some excuse.” He shuffled around uncomfortably as he spoke. “Get what I’m sayin’.”

“Ya, I get it.” I fumbled with my keys. “I screwed it up.”

“I wonder were she was today? You must have really upset her.” Ricky shoved my arm and swayed back and forth on the sides of his feet.

“Shut up.” It seemed like we were ever so slightly being pushed around by an invisible wind.

That night I stayed up late and camped out in the living room. I kept looking out the window for some sign of Jenny. The later it got the weirder I thought it would be to walk

over and knock on her door. Then it seemed too late to text her without coming off as a complete chump.

Around ten-forty I tried to lie down in my bed. What kept me up more than thoughts of Jenny was the way my bed felt. It felt off, like facing the wrong direction off. I started to take in the rest of my room—it all felt a little out of whack so I went back into the living room and sat on the couch. I started to doze off when a pair of lights flooded into the living room—they were going into her driveway. I opened my eyes for a moment but was too damn tired to get off the couch. I heard only one car door open and slam. There was some muffled arguing and then the car sped off. I could have sworn the car went left but I heard the noise go right.

#####

When I saw Jenny the next morning walking to Ms. Hunter's class I couldn't stop myself from speed walking over to her, knocking some poor freshman into a trashcan.

"Hey, what's up," I said.

"What's up?" She had her hair down and with her shoulders slouched.

"Are you okay?" I tried to look through her hair and see her expression.

"Ya, I'm alright." Jenny popped her head up suddenly taking in a deep breath. "Just tired. I got home late last night."

"Oh, that's cool. I went to bed pretty late too." I put my hands in my pockets.

We walked into class and took our seats. "Want to copy my notes from yesterday?"

"That's sweet, but I'm alright." Jenny half smiled and put her elbows on her desk and rested her head in her palm. Ms. Hunter had a sub for the day. The end of class bell made Jenny jumped out of her seat. "Shit." She looked around the room.

“You fell asleep.” I collected my things quickly, hoping to help Jenny with her stuff, but she never took anything out. She was up with her backpack quicker than me. In the hall I tried to ask her before we split for lunch but I choked—ironically on the gum I popped in my mouth specifically to freshen things up when I asked her.

Jenny’s brother came stomping over to her before I could recover. “Jenny, what was all that about last night, mom is pissed?”

“What, go away Tim.”

“Go away, some thanks. I tried to cover for. I know you were with some guy.”

“Just go away Tim, go bother your football pals or something. I have a headache.”

“More than a headache is waiting for you at home, that’s for sure.”

“Oooh, I’m scared.” Jenny swatted her hand at her brother.

“You’ve been warned.” He turned, but before he left he looked at me and said, “What’s up man, you okay? You look like hell.”

“Hey Tim,” I said. I saw little black dots floating around as soon as I heard Jenny was with a guy. It was like I stood up too fast. I nearly fell over right there in front the flippin’ lockers.

“I got to go,” Jenny said. She gave me a quick hug and walked off. That one arm half shoulder squeeze put me just enough at ease to make it through the day.

That night I sat up, thinking of how to ask Jenny, but I kept hearing what her brother said, *I know you were with some guy*, over and over.

Fortunately, I saw Jenny in her house when I looked out the living room window. No one came or left that night. Ricky called me after dinner to ask me what Jenny said. I told him what happened. He said he felt for me and that I needed to ask her because he and his

dad finally got the Corvette running. He had called to not just break my balls but to tell me his dad was going to let us take the Vette to homecoming. I'd be lying if I said that didn't get my mind off of Jenny for a bit. Ricky and I talked, just shot the shit, until we started passing out on the phone with one another. Cute, right.

#####

Wednesday morning I sprung out of bed. I knew how I was going to ask Jenny— junior high style, via a note. It worked for me three years before, why not go two for two. On the way to school I got a text from Ricky.

Got doc apt this morn. C U after Inch. Ask her! Dnt Fck it up 😊.

I was sort of relieved he wasn't going to be there when I gave her the note. He would probably have tried to talk me out of it.

I wrote several drafts in first and second period. They were all way too wordy. Stuff like, "So, Jenny. What's up?" or, "Hope your day is going great. So, I wanted to ask you something." One of them even explained how I miss understood her at last weeks game when she asked me about homecoming—freakin' dumb I know. I decided on:

Jenny,

Want to come to home coming?

I folded it into fourths and stuffed it into my back pocket. AP Psychology sucked. In general the class sucked, but I took it because Jenny raved about it last semester. Everyone else who signed up for the elective thought we would talk about crazy people, and learn how to interrogate—stuff like that. No, it was all reading and listening to Mr. Miller lecture at sub-boring speed. But that day's class was the longest fifty-five minutes I had ever endured. It was so bad I tried to listen, hoping that would make things go by faster. Mr.

Miller said something about how the brain can defy physics. That during a traumatic experience our brains can seem to slow down time because they are working so fast. With that logic in mind Mr. Miller's class was extremely traumatic that day.

The bell rang and I was out—in the hall desperately scanning the corridor for Jenny as more and more students poured out of classes and flooded in. As I walked towards Ms. Hunter's class I kept grabbing my back pocket to make sure the note was still there.

I hauled ass, bumping into backpacks and saying excuse me with every other breathe, but some how Jenny beat me to class. Ms. Hunter was absent again. I sat down and rolled my fingers across my desk. I looked over at Jenny who was leaning back in her chair watching me squirm.

"You okay?" She said.

"What, me? Yeah." My hands were shaking and my voice quivered like I was thirteen again. It was uncontrollable. Even my teeth started to chatter.

Jenny looked around the room. "You on something?"

"What, no." Other than the occasional skunky beer I wasn't into getting faded like that. I took a drag off one of Barney Miller's joints before the spring dance last year. Barney was our school's resident stoner and I figured if anyone were a reliable source for my first time it would be him. I laughed hysterically for about fifteen minutes. Ricky found me under one of the picnic tables out side of the school gym. He helped me up and I threw up on his shoes. That was it for me.

"Ookay." Jenny rolled her eyes, leaned over and patted me on the head.

I couldn't sit on the note through another class period.

"Here!" I shifted my weight in my seat and reached down the back of my pants.

“What are you doing?” Jenny leaned away from me with her eyes open wide.

“I’ve been meaning to give you this.” Looking a little relieved Jenny took it. She started to unfold it. “Wait, wait,” I said.

“What now?”

“Just wait to open it until next period.” As soon as she took it I regretted writing it.

“Fine,” Jenny said with a sigh of indifference.

“Do you want to go to the homecoming dance together?” It just came out.

“Oh, well...”

“I figured since we go to all the games, you know.” I knew I should just let her talk. Get it over with quickly. “It doesn’t have to be a date. You know?”

“I totally would but I’m going with my boyfriend—”

That was the last thing I heard. There was a howling in my ears, like a bomb being dropped and the heat of emotion burned through my face. Then, just like Ms. Hunter said it would, the world stopped spinning suddenly. Sounds merged together like echoes in a long hall speeding towards one another and smashing together like freight train. Everything moved as if in a slow motion montage or something. I saw Jenny’s hair fly up around her face. She reached out for me before being thrown across the room and out one of the large windows on the other side of class. My body lurched up but was held in place by my legs that were pinned beneath the bars of my desk—the bolts at its base rattled and squeaked. One after another more students were flying across the room and out the windows or being pinned against the ceiling. The flag in the corner of the room, sprawled out and waving, impaled the sub. Bits of pencils, dirt, shattered glass, and staples blew in the air and scratched the hell out of my face and arms. A textbook barely missed smashing in my

forehead. The classroom door came off its hinges and went flailing down the hall. Kids and some of the staff all mixed together with whatever wasn't bolted down in the hall and rushed by Ms. Hunter's classroom, bouncing back and forth off the lockers as they went. I witnessed Amanda Cunningham's half naked body slammed into the trophy case across the way. She waved her arms frantically until a large floor buffer collided with her. Outside the clouds swirled around and vanished into the sky. Cars and people outside were falling up, followed by trees and parts of buildings, then whole buildings. Some of the roof tiles cracked and then split in half and ascended with large chunks of the school. Just outside in the school mall Barney Miller, barely visible through the chaos, clung desperately to a bike chain attached to a water pipe, his legs kicking before he disappeared into oblivion. Everything was flying off the planet at one thousand miles per hour. My legs hurt like hell and were probably broken. The pandemonium faded with my consciences to the sound of Jenny saying, *my boyfriend... my boyfriend* and the sight of her face as she reached out for me.