

*Like the End*

*One Hour Left*

Everything is dripping. Fat globs long accumulated slip from branches, smack the pavement, slap her head. The water soaks through her hood, collects in her hair; it runs down her neck—she should've borrowed a raincoat.

At least it's a short walk: the equivalent of three or so blocks spent skirting parking lots, negotiating clumps of student housing. She jogs up a staircase, across a bike path, then a street and *voila!* The duplex slumps in peeling beige splendor.

Beneath the low ceiling of the blissfully dry basement kitchen, she shivers.

("My room's behind the pretty doors." He had coupled the instruction with a peck on the lips before side-stepping into the bathroom that first night. She had entered dizzy and giddy, but entrenched in the basement's mildew-y realism, her "colleague" —friend? lover? hook-up?— taking a piss behind a shower curtain, she swayed, straining to recall the euphoria of an hour prior. It took every ounce of clenched-jawed courage to act on her interpretation of his words and unlatch the French doors beyond the fridge.)

The concealing curtains billow as she bursts through.

"Did you get it?" He springs from the bed, snatching the pharmacy sack about which she valiantly waves. "Oh nice, nice. How much was it?"

"Fifty fucking bucks." She slips off her sopping overalls, pulls the sweatshirt over her head, and steps from decrepit sneakers onto the mattress.

"Ouch. For a single pill too. I can pay you 20 or something."

“It’s fine. I mean, it’s technically my parents’ money.” She knows his precarious economic position and plus, she figures, it’s mostly her fault.

“Thanks, parents!”

She turns her attention to the TV, where glimpses of sand-soaked carnage flash across the screen. “The guy at the pharmacy was pretty cute.”

“Should’ve got his number.”

“Really the ideal environment and situation too: ‘Why hello, my shit is obviously not in order . . . text me?’”

He nuzzles her, laughing. “Hey. Your shit’s in order, or at least, you’ll get it there soon. You’re smart and kind and funny and . . .” His fingers twist her tangled curls. “You’ll get it.”

“You promise?”

“Yes.” He rises, dumping the sack’s contents onto the crumpled comforter. “But you should take this now; I’ll get you some water.”

“Uh huh.”

She’s fumbling at the packaging, really excessive in her opinion. “Hey could you grab a knife or scissors while you’re at it?”

Package pried apart, instruction pamphlet (paper semi-gloss periwinkle with hot pink accoutrement) splayed before them, and a tiny pill in her hand, she pauses.

“Says this thing might fuck with my hormones, give me anxiety and stuff.”

“Well, luckily you already have that.”

“Funny.”

He passes her the water. “Ready?”

“Ready.”

She lets the pill rest on her tongue, relishes the acrid taste which swells and pulses across her palette in time to the waves of resolve and tender nostalgia which ebb and flow deep within.

She swallows: time to move on.

### *Twelve Hours Left*

“I don’t get why they close the pharmacy at eight when the store stays open till eleven.” Her voice muffles beneath the comforter.

“Seems pretty logical.” He drags a spoon across the carton rim, skimming off crystalized tendrils of Cherry Garcia. “I tend to make my Gardettos and Funyuns purchases far later in the evening than my prescription pick-ups.”

She yanks the bedding from her face; curls dance in the static. “You don’t have any prescriptions.”

“But if I did . . .”

“You’d probably benefit from some head meds, come to think of it.”

He pulls the spoon from his mouth. “I don’t want my brain all foggy and spacey.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s cute on you. But for me—”

“—You’re right. Broody sad boy is a much better look.”

He pouts into the almost emptied carton.

In the ensuing silence she unlocks her phone. "There's still enough time if we grab it tomorrow morning."

"When's the pharmacy open?"

"Um." She scrolls to the "hours" section. "looks like eight . . . Oh but it's a Sunday so 9:30."

He scoops the last of the ice cream then shoves aside the half-eaten pad thai to make space for the carton on the bedside table. Overdue Arabic worksheets and a pack of condoms fall to the floor.

"I'll set my alarm for nine then."

"Sounds good."

She can't help the hyperawareness which keeps her chest clenched, can't help but check every statement for a hint of the cavalier, strain to catch inattention in a caress. They're near the end . . . well, technically beyond it, she knows. The next month will be marred by some sort of gradual decline or abrupt cessation; it doesn't really matter which at this point, just when.

She draws the covers back over her head, sidles up beside him, lets a hand travel down his chest.

"No."

"What?" She pauses. Is this the when?

"I'm not gonna fuck you. I'm still mad. Also I don't like you calling me a sad boy."

"You called me spacey."

"I did not."

“You insinuated.” She flops over, scooting to the far edge of the mattress. “Whatever. My clit feels like it’s gonna fall off anyway.”

“Yeah. Last time I decided to keep going until it hurt a bit.”

“I noticed.”

“Why didn’t you stop me?”

(A month ago he had kissed her and she held her mouth firm, pulling away slowly. That night his breathing evened and she imagined the walk back to her dorm: frat boys would jeer as she’d pull taut her sweatshirt against the autumnal evening breeze and would she love herself more? Would she be teaching it a lesson—that ego of his by which she was so charmed? That night she fell asleep to the urgent chorus of concerned friends— *he’s leading you on/sounds like a douche*—on repeat in her ears. His snores eventually drowned it out.)

“Don’t know. Just didn’t.” She keeps the blankets over her face. “So you’re mad at me for what? Forgetting to take birth control?”

“Yes. You were irresponsible.”

“I wasn’t the one who didn’t wear a condom.”

“I would’ve put one on if you had mentioned missing your pills.”

“It’s literally gonna start tomorrow.”

“I don’t have the money to be paying for your abortion.”

She laughs. “Come on, I’d only make you pay half of it.”

“Don’t get an abortion,” he groans, joining her at the edge.

She buries her head in his chest, exhales as his spidery arms enwrap her. “So you’d rather I just have the kid?”

“That might make hiding this whole thing a bit more difficult.”

“Andrea would probably be a bit suspicious.”

“It would really jeopardize my plan of getting you two to be friends.”

She pauses, squeezes shut her eyes. “It would be a pretty good looking kid.”

“Our kid? It would be adorable.”

“And hella smart.”

“Really it’s a shame to wipe out all this potential.”

They giggle.

“—Or for the best,” she sighs. “Little asshole would probably be a piece of work: depression, alcoholism, anxiety . . . a lousy sense of monogamy.”

“Hey.” He inches down, his face now level with hers. “Really I only broke that rule once, with one person. Guess who that was?”

Those eyes. For three inexplicable months she has been studying them, trying to make sense of them, yet still they mystify her—those pools of milky blue-green. “I know who.”

“Yeah because it’s you, silly! It was all you.”

“So it’s my fault?”

He pauses and for a second the pools are obscured. “We both . . . I mean, I’m not sure. But, whatever happened, I mean, I’m glad it did.”

“I am too.”

They adjust, her facing away, him reaching around, pulling her in. His breath tosses her hair. It had always been easy.

“I love you.”

"I love you, too."

*Fourteen Hours Left*

"Wait, how many days did you miss?"

"Umm, like two this week and maybe another at the beginning of the month." She brushes back unruly strands of hair, uncertain whether she ought to return to a non-straddling position. "I guess I also didn't take one today."

"Fuck."

"But my period should start tomorrow! Like there's really not much risk this late in the cycle." She lifts a leg, disentangling herself from him. "Plus I only missed a couple days."

"That's still a chance though. Like I've definitely heard of it happening that way."

"But it's super unlikely."

"Aren't you supposed to wear a condom even if you miss a single day?" His voice sports an edge she hadn't anticipated.

". . . I guess."

"You should've told me."

"I, I wasn't thinking."

"Well. Guess we have to go buy Plan B now." He rises only to slam his body back down upon the mattress. "You think QFC might have it?"

"Maybe. I bet Bartell does."

"How late are they open?"

“Uh.” She fishes about boxes of Thai takeout for her phone. “Looks like, uh, it’s open till eleven. They both are.”

“And it’s 8:30 now.” He squints at the phone. “God, why is your brightness so high?” Her finger slides across the screen, dimming it to his liking. “How long do we have?”

“Uh.” She strains to read the text against the darkened backdrop. “It says you can take it up to 72 hours after.”

“But it says here it works best within the first 36.”

“True.”

“You’re taking it in the first 36. I’ll go pick up ice cream at QFC because I want ice cream, and you can drop by Bartell and get the pill.”

“I have to get it on my own?” It would grant a level of legitimacy to the whole affair, she figures, to have him there beside her sharing the shame.

“Yeah, that way I can get the ice cream, kill two birds.”

She doesn’t press it, merely slips a hand between the mattress and wall, sweeping it back and forth until her fist reemerges clutching her crumpled underwear.

“You said it’s 8:30? What did we even do today?”

“Woke up after having unprotected sex, had unprotected sex, slept, had more unprotected sex.” He turns to the bedside table. “And there was dinner in here at like four.”

“—which was also lunch and breakfast.”

“Not a big day for caloric exertion.”

She flops back onto the mattress, tracing cracks in the ceiling beneath which she has spent the entire day. “I didn’t finish.”



“Neither did I,” he snorts. “Your informing me that this might get you pregnant kinda killed the vibe.”

“If we leave at nine, we’ll still have two hours or so.”

“I guess it doesn’t make a difference whether I use a condom or not.” Their limbs tangle.

“Guess the vibe’s not dead after all.”

“No, it’s dead. I’ll be anger-fucking you this time. Because you messed up.”

She doesn’t mind.

### *Twenty Hours Left*

Al Jazeera America is on. Like always.

“Who ya texting?”

He angles the phone screen towards her; she squints at a Reddit chain, something about Russian military aircraft.

“God the Ruskies have nothing on our spy planes.” He grins, absorbed in wing designs, gifs of takeoffs. “Like if we actually were serious about supporting the Kurds, Putin and Assad would be fucked.”

“America first, God bless,” she rattles off flatly.

(“So I know you want to be a foreign correspondent and all but wouldn’t you rather be the one controlling the action instead of just reporting on it?” In the crush of bodies and tossed Kodachrome lights, she had been pleasantly surprised to register a familiar face at the party. That said face belonged to the cute Junior from Poli Sci 250 was an added benefit. And so as her hair lifted with each of his exhalations espousing the virtues of diplomacy, she grinned, amazed at her good fortune: mutual political passion and—could it be?—mutual physical attraction.)

“Good nap?” He maintains focus on the chain.

“Okay enough.” She returns her attention to the TV screen and Bashar al Assad’s smug face which occupies it. The story ends; the Syrian leader’s mug is replaced by Donald Trump who waves a fat hand at the camera. “Why do the good guys never win?”

“Huh?”

“Nothing.”

He sets aside the phone, inches up beside her. “You’re really cute when you’re jealous, but you do know you’ll have to get past it pretty soon, right?”

“What makes you think I’m jealous?”

He demurely raises an eyebrow. “Who ya texting?”

“Oh hush.” She avoids his gaze, instead letting the news crawl blur before her unblinking eyes. “I’ll stop.”

“Good. I don’t want you to be jealous.”

“I’ll be jealous or I’ll be better than her.”

“Then be better than her.”

“I will.”

### *Twenty-Six Hours Left*

For three months she has wondered how they manage to always wake up simultaneously. Maybe it’s a subtle awareness, the sense of one body’s stirring which pulls the other into consciousness: an under-researched human quirk rooted in some now-extraneous evolutionary advantage.

They blink at one another, grinning sheepishly.

(It had been sunny, that first morning. In the haze of filtered light he had stretched, smiled. “Morning, sweetheart.” She was not unfamiliar with the application of the verb “melt” in the romantic context but before that moment had always considered it a literary exaggeration.)

He doesn’t speak. No suave lines saved for sleepy-eyed girls. He simply extends his arms, draws her close, inhales.

“I guess I did know,” she whispers into his chest. “Just didn’t know it would be so soon.”

#### *A Few Hours Prior*

That stupid blue and orange coat. On the otherwise abandoned stretch—occasional pools of artificial light prodding dense shadow—it’s the coat, its complementary color-blocking evocative of 80s ski-wear, that alerts her of his approach.

And then there’s the grin. Crooked and so fucking cheeky. An unlit cigarette rests limp between amused lips.

“Light me, darling.”

She fishes in her pocket, fingers closing about the two-dollar Bic. She raises it as they meet, click: A flame ignites.

He leans in, pulls hard. “Ah, thank you.”

Neon “closed” signs illuminate their faces, casting strange shadows, exaggerated angles. The coat takes on a dayglow quality.

He passes her the cigarette; it’s wet and dense. She pulls hard through the matted filter, tasting a little tobacco, mostly pervading dampness, impending endings.

“Did ya know this was gonna happen?” Alcohol from some kickback to which she was not invited only adds swagger to his smile.

“Wasn’t sure.” She tries a second pull, exhales a sorry plume which dissipates almost instantly upon escape. “I was actually pretty convinced we’d made a clean cut.”

She returns the cigarette, watches him lean back—face to the sky as if gravity can induce a better nicotine kick—and inhale. “Oh God, I’m addicted. You know I’ve had this in my mouth for like 20 minutes? Snagged it from Tory who’s a dear. Was just waiting for a light.”

“Explains why the filter’s ass.”

He ignores her, exhales a shallow cloud. “You’re my light!”

“So sterio—” She pauses, half laughing, half digging for the right word. “— clichéd. So clichéd.”

“Still stoned, I see.”

“Shhhh. Well, maybe a little.”

“Well anyways, I knew.”

“Did ya?”

“Knew the moment I kissed you ‘goodbye.’”

“When’s she coming back, again?”

“Andrea? Like the 14th, I want to say.” He nudges a Rainier can crushed into the pavement. “Unimportant details.”

She smirks, sniffs a bit.

They're walking, retracing a route once blazed in quivering alveoli, the thrilling release of short, hot breath. Each framing complex and narrow alley now seeps into a stew of dull familiarity.

"Were you glad I called?" She shivers at his uncharacteristically tepid tone.

". . . Yeah."

"Knew it."

"Fuck off," she giggles.

"Anyways, know how I knew?" he chides.

"How?"

"I knew, because I know you love me."

"Shut up . . . you said it first."

"I was drunk. Trump had just won. I was despairing."

"And then said it again when you were sober."

He pauses, swaying a bit. The cigarette has extinguished, leaving only a memory of smoldering light between their faces. "Well Trump had still won and I was still despairing."

"Yeah, yeah, we all were. No excuse."

Flecks of neon glint in his eyes; he shrugs his shoulders before redirecting them to her.

"Yeah. I did say it. Because it's true."

Her dimples deepen.

With a click of the heels he continues walking, slipping his hand about her's. "Now, what I texted you about just cuddling from here on out?"

"Uh huh?"

“That was a lie. I’m gonna fuck you.”

“Good.”

*Three Months Prior*

Her outstretched arms sway in counter to the teetering of her body as she gingerly places one foot before the other, heel to toe, so as not to stray from the narrow curb. It’s the type of gait shared between the whimsically tipsy and the very young—one party testing a recently-learned skill, the other overanalyzing a skill long ago rendered rote. Eighteen years old with a palette unaccustomed to beer (ever the victim of peer pressure, she had stolen a sip of his Fat Tire only to do a spit take: too bitter, too frothy), she occupies neither category.

He pauses mid-sway on the curb’s accompanying sidewalk, and in her peripheral she notes his amused smirk, exaggerated by the streetlamp’s filtered gold. “Kissing guys with girlfriends then gallivanting about town. Who are you?”

“What can I say?” Her arms whirl and with a twist of her hips she’s squarely before him. “So you’re a guy with a girlfriend now. What happened to ‘we’re on a break?’”

His left hand settles at the dip of her waist. “Break, study abroad: same difference.”

“And how long is this study-abroad of her’s?”

“Three months.” The right hand copies the left.

“You seem quite broken up about it.”

“Oh you’re very cute now.”

She smirks. “Yeah?”

“Oh my God I just told you I have a girlfriend! Why do you keep kissing me?”

“Oh my God you just told me you have a girlfriend! Why is your hand on my ass?”

Distant drunken giggles are tossed in the late summer breeze and she notes the stiffening of his chest.

“You okay?” She follows his gaze out in the direction of the voices.

“Yeah.” He shrugs, pulls her in. “I have a good feeling about this year, yeah?”

She’s nodding.