

It was Cinco de Mayo when we broke our silence. The party had chips, dips and other things that seem Mexican but aren't and I'd had too much tequila for her to be there. None of our mutual friends had the sense to warn me but I don't take advice anyway.

She came in with two inattentive friends, which are the worst kind a girl can have. As soon as the door opened they broke off to flirt and drink and beg for validation, leaving her roaming from conversation to conversation. I was in the living room where a well mixed crowd was milling about and drinking in order to talk to one another. I barricaded myself with bodies of chatting acquaintances.

"I'm actually going to work in Honduras after graduation," said Gabriel.

"No way, that's amazing," I said.

"Yeah, I'm excited."

"When are you leaving?"

"I'm going in July once my visa comes in. So yeah, I'm excited."

"You already speak Spanish?"

He was vaguely Hispanic and I was too drunk to avoid racial assumptions. I had been feeling especially fine that day.

Tequila and limeade were certainly contributors but I felt a

larger current at work as well, nudging me out into deep water.

"No I'm going to spend my first couple months in language school."

"Oh I just thought..."

"No my parents are bilingual, my grandparents too, but they never taught us really."

"Well hey man, I think it's great that you're just going for it. Most people are just trying to grab the safest thing, but you're really doing it!

As he continued to describe his goals, I began to absorb his excitement and draft my own ill conceived visions of grandeur. Normally I wouldn't have given a solitary fuck about his plans, but after that much alcohol I often catapulted into affirmation, clapping shoulders and encouraging even the most banal successes. Once I started, the inertia carried me until I bowled through walls and collided with every boundary of decorum. When I ran out of limeade I hugged Gabe sloppily and stomped to the kitchen.

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Several people had congregated there away from the larger crowd, but I went straight to the fridge to find a new mixer. I grabbed a bottle of orange juice and poured the rest of my tequila into it without any charade of measurement. I was

fixated on enjoyment, throwing ideas together to make a shoddy scaffolding that would lift me into destiny. I closed the door to find myself in a small space with a woman I had no business talking to.

"Hey."

"You drinking orange juice?"

"You know how I am about staying hydrated."

"Wouldn't water be better for that?"

"Cinco de Mayo calls for Vitamin C."

I hadn't seen her slip into the kitchen, and suddenly here she was in front of me before I could consider how to react. I took a drink. She didn't drink much because once when we were together, she got too drunk and threw up pineapple liqueur all night. Once had been enough for her, and that's why I loved her. She learned from herself, whereas I would never learn anything.

She said she had been doing fine, and then we began talking about things we should have left well enough alone. I never should have said, "Remember when." She shouldn't have admitted remembering. We knew that we were talking about people who were long dead and a time that was long passed.

False historians and fools romanticize the past to distract themselves from the present. They talk about a time when manners were practiced and people still wrote letters to each other, but

they forget that typhoid and war killed indiscriminately alongside that lost etiquette. The two of us remembered our dim lit dinners and the scent of skin, but we forgot everything else.

The conversation wound down but I began to feel the current pulling stronger until I was flowing with it and adding my own energy to its motion. I drifted into the other room and my roommates approached me. They asked if I was ready to leave and I explained with surprising fluency that I had planned to catch a ride with someone else. The ease with which I lied did not break my stride or theirs.

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It had taken several swigs for me to realize that the hosts stocked their fridge with high pulp orange juice, making my tequila sunrise a chunky smoothie of agave soaked fruit debris, too much for even the most degenerate alcoholic. I went back to the fridge with exaggerated stealth and took a long swig of the disgusting juice hooch before tossing the jug inside. When I closed the door she was there again.

"You keep following me in here," I said.

"You wish."

"Had to put the orange juice back."

"Got enough fluids?"

"Always gotta be hydrated."

She laughed. The other guests had drained out of the kitchen, and I felt like they had taken the air with them. Soon the appliances, the cups, and the walls would fall away until we were only molecules left there.

"Don't think I should drive."

"Did your roommates leave already?"

"Yeah, bastards. It'll probably be fine."

"No, no, wait just a second."

She looked around but she had inattentive friends, they were drunk or gone or flirting with someone. I got my keys and turned towards the door but she caught me by the hand and my senses short circuited. Our hands met on the keys until I let go. She hesitated and looked around at the remaining stragglers that dotted the house. The current was barreling me end over end, forward and deeper into itself. I went to the door and she came with me.

Outside we crossed the yard, a thin, calculated silhouette beside a stumbling mass with the grace of a rugby player. She walked to the driver side and I caught a hint of invitation when she turned to face me.

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Upon waking I gasped for breath as if I was coming up from

a dive, heat rising in waves from the bed. After worming out of the tangled sheets, I found my glasses on the floor but my vision stayed blurry when I put them on. I felt a pendulum beating between my eyes as I lurched for the shower.

I clawed at the walls of the hallway and tried to assemble some coherent narrative from the previous night. I could only see isolated flashes broken up by a pounding hammer that beat my memories into a diaspora. I tried to gather them but the hammer strikes came in rhythm and knocked them further and further into dark corners that I couldn't penetrate. The scenes were out of order and shaky, as if they had been filmed with a cheap camcorder and not my own eyes.

Through the uncertainty, a consuming dread radiated from a source deep in my reptilian consciousness. My body could feel the guilt before my mind could find the source, like when you pull your hand away from a hot stove before you know you've touched it. The shower head spit brisk drops and I scrubbed the liquor sweat off of me. The water hitting the floor filled the space with loud white noise. I pushed back into my mind to try and find the source of this toxic guilt but landed somewhere else instead.

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I saw a hotel room with spring sunlight climbing between

curtains, not quite reaching the bed. There was a lump under the covers that looked like a child wanting to stay home from school. In health she was slight, with arms that begged to take yours as she crossed the street, feminine like a jet set actress, and beautiful as only a genuinely good person can be. But sickness turned her delicacy to frailty so that she lay in bed like a baby bird fallen from the nest. I had been up for almost an hour but hadn't made a sound. She stirred so I got a glass of water and brushed the hair from her face.

"Hey. You feeling better?"

"I feel about the same. You should go with Carey and David, I think it's just a bug."

"I already told them to go without us. They left an hour ago."

"Ah you didn't have to do that."

"Shhh, drink some water and go back to sleep."

She smiled and and I covered her back up after lifting the glass to her lips. Then I slipped in beside her and took one of her limp hands in mine. She didn't want me to give up my vacation, but I wasn't. This was the first time I had ever wanted to lie next to a sick person instead of go out with my friends. I couldn't miss that.

The hammer hit and my thoughts scattered. I felt them rattling inside my head, as the water droplets pounded on top of me. I stared at the cheese grater over the drain and let the drops envelope my wilted body. Maybe if they covered every square inch of my skin they would take me down with them through the pipes. I'd melt into a drop and rush down into the river of filth I belonged in, moving out and out until we all got dumped into the ocean and befouled it too. Then if I was lucky I could evaporate away, leaving the stench and dirt behind, rising in the clouds to wherever the weather might take me. Instead I was beginning to prune and unable to force order on my thoughts. I looked for last night but landed in the hotel again.

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I had lain next to her for a while pretending to sleep, but after a short hour I rose slowly and tiptoed down to the lobby. The sun had by that time taken up an acute angle and was pouring into the bay windows at the front of the hotel. Two cognac leather armchairs sat in those slices of light with their backs to the street, and I settled into one after grabbing a complimentary paper.

I opened it, not because I needed to know the news, but because that's what you do when you're waiting on someone. I opened the paper like my father had done on Sunday afternoons,



letting us all know that even his leisure time was filled with matters of life and death. I was waiting for a beautiful woman to wake up and again require my love and protection, Dad would've been proud.

I read the business section, sipping an overpriced coffee while the mid morning sun backlit me like an Aztec god. It should have been a seminal moment, but I didn't notice; our reference points are disasters not joys. You might hear someone say, "That was after my divorce," or, "That was the year that Mother died." Never, "That was the year we were really happy," or, "Was that before or after we grew really close to the kids?" We expect happiness as if we deserve it.

Close to noon I went to the corner store to get soup, crackers, and bottled water. When I got back to the room I closed the door gingerly but she was already awake.

"I got chicken noodle soup and crackers, are you hungry?"

"I don't think I want any soup."

"Well try some crackers then."

I handed her a roll of Ritz and bottle of water.

"More water?" she said.

"You need to be hydrated," I said.

She laughed and ate her crackers like a wild animal being hand fed for the first time. Her movements were cautious but she

drank deliberately so that I would see her and not worry as much. She gathered herself and went quietly to take a shower. When she returned, she was delicate but refreshed and looking stronger for it.

We sat next to each other in bed and watched movies until that evening when Carey and Dave got back from the hike we had planned to take together. During that time we didn't talk much and at various points her breathing slowed and she slumped into sleep on my shoulder.

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I blinked. The water heater would not hold out forever and soon the dropping temperature would force me outside to follow the trail of desperation and broken glass I had wrought the night before. The pounding in my head had slackened to a velvet nudge, but I was no closer to reordering those confused scenes; they were still too dark and not yet in focus.

I didn't care to know the secrets they held. Shame, questions, chaos: this was the natural order of things and I was accustomed to it. In drunkenness I had lunged out to grasp a moment of happiness too beautiful to ignore. My only sin was not recognizing a mirage of my past.

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