

## Zero Zero

One night we saw a UFO—I wouldn't even talk about it if no one else saw it. Driving in the middle of nowhere, along a hill, slowly curving up. The lights appeared far off in the sky. Then shimmered closer. And closer. And closer. We talked about the lights. We all saw them. I turned the car around. Took us off the hill. An hour later a cop pulled me over for driving too slow and searched me. I had a reason. It was snowing and we saw a family of deer by the road. I hit a deer once and knew the damage they could do. I was also stoned, yes, and the pipe and the rest of my weed is what they arrested me for having. I was very kind about the whole thing. Showed politeness to the officers. Thanked them when they opened the squad door. I hoped if I acted nice enough they'd let me go. You always hear those stories from people about how police let them go. But they didn't let me go.

Hock paid my bail on his credit card. The whole process took a few hours. I sat in a room with a *Reader's Digest* and picnic table. By the time we were on our way home the sun was rising. Rising on Y2K because the day was New Years Eve. Hock was throwing a party that night. I dropped him, Denny and Haven off, then went home. My parents wouldn't find out about the arrest until months later when the lawyer mail showed up. I had lived in both of their homes and they both received the mail. But that wouldn't happen for months.

When I woke in the afternoon I felt my arrest story raising like the skin of a new tattoo. I went to Hock's. We used his fake ID and filled his fridge with beer. He panfried chicken breasts and

boiled a can of green beans. Our New Years dinner. We hadn't been perfect children, but we always got away until the night before.

Denny showed up with Haven and Haven's little sister, Molly. Then others showed up. Maybe a dozen of us by eleven thirty. People thought the Earth might end at midnight because computers couldn't interpret the double zero in the year two thousand and the whole world would crash. My uncles imagined a wild west society with kerosene lamps and revolvers. They stocked my grandpa's with cans of food, a gas generator and guns. At midnight they believed the phones would die, the lights would go out and the starving hordes from the city would raid the suburbs.

At the party, we counted down with the TV. Denny with Haven and Molly, Hock and the rest; shouting and sparkling in hats. I held the phone. The news warned not to pick up the line at midnight because too many people picking up lines might crash the system. I wanted the system to crash. At midnight, I picked up the line. The dial tone buzzed. I called my mom and then my dad, and told them the world hadn't ended. They each said, "Happy New Year, Col."

Haven's sister lingered on the couch. Molly. Not quite a woman. She blurred in the mists between girlhood and womanhood. Hips and breasts budding away from her androgynous teenage body. I don't know why Haven brought her. People brought their younger siblings along without reason all the time. Denny gave her a beer and she carried it around the party all night. No one talked with her and she looked lonely on the couch, tucking the warm beer between her legs. I hung up with my father and stole the empty seat alongside her.

The TV displayed celebrations all over the world, but the sound couldn't be heard over the music. Hock turned party lights on. Colored lasers zapped in stripes and a strobe peppered

the bathroom hallway with silver flashes. Some people danced, but most talked in groups. Haven danced. She pushed her butt out and thrust her arms in the air. Molly watched her.

“Can you dance like your sister?” I said.

“I can dance better than that. I’m on dance squad.”

I didn’t know what dance squad was, but didn’t need her to explain. “Don’t like beer?”

“No.”

“I could make you something.”

“That’s alright. Thanks.” Haven danced like performing an ancient ritual. “My sister’s drunk.”

“Maybe a little. I’ve seen her drunker.”

“Is that all you guys do? Get drunk?”

I recognized the teenage judgement in her voice. Molly hadn’t yet learned to ignore the rules from her youth. I pitied her pimples, one by one. “Not always. Last night we took a road trip.”

“To where—a bar?”

“No. We drove to the camp we went to as kids. There’s a big bell they ring for meals. Last night we drove there and rang the bell.”

“Why would you drive there in winter?”

My response would blow her teenage mind. “That’s the same thing the cop asked.”

“You got in trouble?”

“Yeah.” I gave a serious sneer towards the strobing hallway. Then back to Molly. “I got arrested.”

“Arrested?” Molly’s mouth went slack. “For what?”

“Don’t tell your sister I’m telling you this. Possession of marijuana.”

“How are you not in jail right now?”

“Hock bailed me out.”

Molly sipped her beer. She seemed to calculate all I told her into a self made equation. She took another sip. “I have to use the bathroom.”

Molly passed through the laser and strobe unaffected. When she disappeared I grabbed myself a new beer. Hock was playing Asshole with friends at the kitchen table. He donned a silver, *Happy New Year* top hat. Haven clutched my bicep—maybe drunker than I thought.

“What are you telling my sister?”

“Nothing. Why?”

“I don’t need her thinking worse of me.”

“She doesn’t.”

“Is she drunk?”

“No. She hasn’t finished her beer.”

“Good. Good.”

Haven cuddled with Denny where Molly and I had sat on the couch. I leaned against the alcove between the living room and the kitchen. The dance music fired away like sped up sci-fi effects. Molly came back through the tunnel of flashing light. She lost her beer somewhere. She put her hands up in front of me, like a tiny bear. “Mercy?”

“Mercy?”

Molly rolled her eyes. “You wanna play Mercy? I’m really good.”

I didn't tell Molly I was also really good. I gripped her hands in mine. Her fingers felt like chicken bones. I played along with her attack at first, stopping her bends with my strength before they hurt me. I let her push my wrists back and acted like it hurt. She twisted her body for leverage and pulled my hands back towards her wrists. She couldn't finish me because I was too strong for her. We were like a human knot in our corner of the room when I found the opportunity for a swing around move. I used her momentum, spun her wrist and gripped her hands. "—Ow ow ow ow ow."

I let go.

Molly held her wrist and sucked air through her teeth. "That really hurt!"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to."

The whole party heard her yelp, and now everyone gathered around us. I really didn't mean to hurt her. I just wanted to show her how good I was. Haven took her sister into her arms. "Let me see."

"I'm sorry."

"Dude, she's a little girl," Hock yelled. "What were you thinking?"

"I don't know. I was just playing the game."

Denny shook his head, smirked.

"Can you get ice?" Haven said to Denny.

"Let me," I said.

"No. Why don't you sit down." Haven cradled Molly's wrist.

I went with Denny to the fridge. He held Hock's dishrag and I scooped ice into it.

"I didn't mean to hurt her."

“I know. She’ll chill out eventually. Maybe you should take a walk or something. Go buy smokes.”

I snatched my coat from Hock’s bed and snuck into the apartment hallway without anyone asking where I was going. In the hall it didn’t seem like there could be a party going on behind the door I just came from. Some of Hock’s neighbors sat on the front steps with beers, and smoked cigarettes. Hock lived on the Marquette campus. Parties raged in many of the old mansions converted into student living. Party lights shone out of attic and basement windows. Dull bass lines rumbled. The minimart sold cigarettes three blocks away. Crushed salt dusted the sidewalks, and the snowbanks along the sides were dotted with litter. I avoided the poor people and their stories about gasless cars or needing bus fare. Their stranded pleas. I had heard all the stories and at one time or another paid for each one.

The checkout line strung loops through the store. I decided I didn’t need cigarettes that bad and went back outside. A girl smoked by the entrance. When I walked by she said, “Todd.”

I kept walking because *Todd* isn’t my name, but she called again, “Todd. Todd.”

I turned around. I could be Todd. “Hey, what’s up?”

The girl wore a snug dress, but was drunk to the point she had begun melting in it. Her haphazard coat clung to her shoulders like fingers on the edge of a cliff. “Just waiting for these bitches to hurry the fuck up.”

“Yeah. What you guys up to?”

“Heading to Nick and Adam’s.”

“That’s cool. Can I bum a smoke?”

The girl gave me the pack in her hand. I lit a cigarette using the lighter shoved in the cellophane. “It’s so fucking cold,” she said. “Fuck this. I’m not waiting any longer.”

She stamped down the sidewalk and I followed. “Mind if I join you?”

She acted like she didn’t hear me. “It’s a five dollar cover. Just so you know.”

She made phone calls. Yelled at her friends’ voicemails. Called them stupid bitches, said we were coming to the party. I could’ve been anyone. I didn’t even need to pretend to be Todd.

The party was in one of the mansions. The brewery owners built the mansions, but only college students lived there now. A few blocks away the mansions were owned by poorer people. At the door we paid our five dollars. A staircase curled upstairs. They told us go to the basement. I followed the girl to the back of the house. The basement steps were in the kitchen. The music and dampness greeted us on the stairs. Concrete, old wooden beams and cream brick walls sweated like the people dancing. The music thrummed loud and the lights burned dark. I lost the girl as soon as we were downstairs.

A crowd pulsed near the DJ’s speakers and whorl of colored lights. I hunted for beer in the opposite direction. I squeezed my way through the crowded tunnels of the basement. One of those guys who pumps kegs, pumped the keg. “Grab a cup,” he said. I took a cup from the stack, let him pump my beer. I quickly drank that beer and he filled my cup again. The basement tunneled like a catacomb. In one small room a group passed around a mask hooked up to a nitrous tank. I sat on the floor with the others and waited for the mask to float my way. “Go like this,” the boy who took a hit before me said. When I took my hit of nitrous I felt dropped in a can. Moments later I crawled back out and kneeled up from the floor. The girls in the room

grinned so wide their teeth hurt to look at. I waited for another hit, but before the mask came my way again the nitrous ran out.

I found a space of wall near the dance floor and watched the dancers. I thought about what I would do with the girls if I could, but got bored standing against the wall alone. I already had a good story for my friends about finding a party and sucking nitrous. I would go back, say sorry again and tell my story. I refilled my beer for the walk to Hock's.

In the kitchen, a man and a woman pressed their faces together like two pieces of shaved meat. I didn't want to be in the room with them. A strawberry clock ticked above the backdoor. Already four in the morning. I went out that door. Not the way I came in, but the quickest way out.

A couple guys drank beers from bottles in a small space of yard surrounded by fence. I walked through the dark space near the fence and kicked a beer bottle. Then another.

"You don't wanna go that way, dude." One of the guys said. "Lots of broken glass."

Through the snow the slivers of glass glistened. The guy threw his bottle into the pile, then the next guy threw his. Both bottles broke and bits of glass splashed into the streetlight like an actor spitting a plosive. They had more beer in their pockets and opened new ones.

"I just want to go," I said.

"Gotta go back through the front."

I thought about telling them my arrest story, about the UFO, the campgrounds we had driven to see, covered in snow, the cabins like rafts on the white hills. I only knew the camp in summer, but in snow and moonlight the camp revealed its flip side. I didn't tell them. They didn't look like they would care.



The man and woman were gone when I went back in. I passed through the kitchen. The music from the basement thumped, and the chorus of partygoers yelled in a steady stream of words, revving like an engine.

In the entryway, I peered up the curling staircase. The balcony and the doors on the second floor flattened in the dark like the backdrop on a stage. Suddenly, two boys came out of one of the rooms. “Shit is bananas as *fuck*,” one said to the other. They giggled and laughed down the stairs. Harmless jokers.

“Wanna see some bananas ass shit?” One said to me, like telling his friend a joke. “Look upstairs.”

The shadowy balcony and the door they left open invited me above. “What’s up there?” I said.

“You’ll see.”

I climbed the steps slow at first, then quickly, hoping I wouldn’t be seen. I clutched the bannister, painted so many times the carvings were smoothed over. I could barely feel the swirls of wings and ivy under my fingers. I didn’t know what I expected behind the door. I don’t know if I expected anything different.

A streetlamp glowed through the uncovered window, casting orange light on dirty clothes. A bed. Gray sheets. A girl. Her clothes missing. Bunches of gray sheet splashed against her stomach. Her breasts toppled over like stones. Her legs untwined out. The sheet pushed below her knees. She smelled like lipgloss and burnt hair. The boys had been looking at her, and who knows what else. I wanted to look too, but also wanted to cover her up. Maybe if she found me being nice she would like me.

I pulled the sheet around her neck and down over her toes. I piled dirty laundry on her from the floor, hiding her. Her eyes didn't open. I knelt alongside her. Beer throbbed through my blood. Her breathing lifted her chest. Air in, air out, air in, air out. If I was a prince I would've kissed her. I touched her hand. Her knuckles bulged away from her finger bones like chicken knuckles, same as Molly's. And the knuckles gave me a jolt. I knew what it would look like if someone caught me touching this girl and needed to get out of the room before somebody this girl mattered to saw me. I dove down the staircase like a phantom and left.

The houses were more quiet now, but some still flashed lights and vibrated with bass lines. The sun hadn't come up yet, even though it was morning. Two beer cans glowed in the moonlight on Hock's stoop. I buzzed his number. No one responded. I worried everyone was asleep and I'd wake them up, but the cold needled at my toes and I buzzed again.

I bounced myself up and down for warmth. I went around back, Hock's apartment windows reflected black. I searched for something to throw, but found only bottles and bricks. Nothing that wouldn't break the window. Around front I buzzed his flat again. Then I buzzed a different flat. Then I mashed the dials with my frozen fingers, buzzing all of them. Finally, someone answered.

“Hello?”

Not a voice I knew.

“Hi. Can you let me in?”

“Who is this?”

“I'm trying to get back in my friend's apartment. I'm cold. Can you please let me in.”

The voice did not respond. I bounced a few more times. In a second I would mash the buttons again, but then the door buzzed and the lock clicked open. My hand darted to the doorknob.

I bathed in the hallway light, sucking up the heat. The hall tile echoed. Hock's door was unlocked. In lumps on the floor and couch lay my friends. I could make out Molly's shape and Haven's with Denny wrapped around her. Molly slept on the couch. Her breathing shallow and quick. Unlike the girl from the room. Her eyes flashed open and caught me. I looked away. She closed her eyes, acting like she hadn't woke up. The voice on the intercom could have been hers. I curled on the floor with a pillow near the green glow from Hock's stereo. I couldn't sleep, and until morning I watched her silhouette breathe.

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I didn't see Molly again until the summer. More of her a woman, but wearing athletic gear, hair in a ponytail.

I waited with Denny for Haven in their parents' kitchen. I said hi. Molly's eyes quivered when a conversation didn't start. We were driving up north that morning for my trial. She had practice for some sport, field hockey? I wanted to apologize again. I sensed I still appeared vicious. Maybe she believed I belonged locked up. She mixed pink and green powder in a clear tube and screwed the lid on. Seeing her again reminded me of the girl in the room. "Need a ride to practice?" I asked.

Molly took a swallow before answering. “Sure. As long as my sister hurries up.” She slammed down her cup and yelled up the stairs in a way that made the words scrape her throat. “Haven. Hurry up!” Only sisters can yell for each other that way.

Moments passed and we didn’t talk. I felt alien-like to her. The way I was older, and not really what she was anymore. Denny was comfortable in the house like his own. He read a magazine from the counter. I said to Molly, “Today is my trial.”

“Are you scared?”

I was. Not that I would be imprisoned—not even really a threat in my case—but scared how big the fine would be. Scared how long I could lose my license. Those two the only real punishment options. Who knows what I deserved. “A little,” I told her. The bravado had sunk. Although I felt a tiny urge bringing it back. “I’m pretty sure I’m not going to jail, but you never know.”

“Jail?”

I twisted up the side of my lips and nodded. “All I can do is pray for mercy.”

Haven trotted down the stairs. “No mercy.” She meant either for my judgement or Molly playing the game with me again. Molly picked up her tube and swigged, I shook the keys in my hand and Denny put down the magazine.

I pulled upon a small field less than a mile away and Molly shot from the car like a hiding cat.

“Thanks,” she said behind her.

A tribe of similar dressed, ponytailed girls stretched in the grass. Early and I could feel the heat rising from the earth. The day would be hot.

We drove with the windows down along the same route we took the night I was arrested, but I didn't get lost this time and we saw no UFO. This time the smell of cow manure dared us to roll up the windows in stinging wafts. My hair poofed up from the wind and humidity and Haven's whipped like tentacles in the backseat, sometimes across her mouth like a gag. Denny kept his dark hair too short for whipping and he loomed like a tree stump by the flood of air blowing in. The fear about going before a judge twisted my stomach, but no one knew what I was really guilty of, and I hid the feeling well.

I was the best dressed defendant in the courtroom—without intention. I wore a polo shirt tucked into khakis. The person sentenced before me for destruction of property wore holey jeans with cartoons drawn on with pen. I stood before the judge and received the minimum sentence: license suspended, monetary fine.

Denny drove us out of the courthouse parking lot and found a nice spot by a river where we rolled and smoked a joint. Little yellow flowers rose up on stalks of thin stems. I picked a few. Haven put one in her hair. I put one in mine. I had no intention to give up driving and took my keys back from Denny, but still, denying my punishment made me feel nerveless.

We stayed in that spot by the river for a long time. The current trickled over rocks and the legs of a discarded table. We were living in the heat, sucking in the dampness, sweating through our clothes. I couldn't back down from what I said I'd do, but I made them wait. I wanted to know what happened to the girl from that night. I wanted to know if I'd recognize her if I saw her again. Wavelets scurried like snakes around the rocks and I wondered.

I dropped Denny and Haven off and went to campus. Late in the day, and summer, so not many people were around. I did a couple laps, trying to study as many students' faces as I could. I didn't see the girl, but couldn't see much from my car. I would need to get out and sit somewhere.

In the morning, I took a book—whatever weird shit I was reading at the time—and found a bench. The book was telling me I should be on the lookout for messages from animals, like crows and beetles, and, maybe with luck, an eagle. If something came to me in the right moment it would become my spirit animal. Then I would know what kind of spirit *I* had and could call on that power. I believed everything the book said.

I waited on the bench until noon and only a handful of students went by, none were the girl. The campus was deserted and I realized I'd need to wait until fall if I wanted any chance of finding the girl from the bed. I inspected the sky for a bird of prey and saw nothing.

The summer played its way out as one might expect, I was alone at the end of it. In September, I went to Hock's and watched for girls from his window. My birthday was a week away. Hock gave me a pill as a gift and put on *Yellow Submarine*. The movie gave me the creeps, so I turned around and looked out the window. Hock didn't care I wasn't watching. I thought I saw her then, the girl from the bed, walking on the street below. I got up to chase after her, but realized I'd have to explain myself to Hock and sat back down. I glanced at him, mouth open, gazing at the blue meanies—I could say anything.

I trailed the girl down a block, then another. I caught up with her near the end of the second block. We were standing at the corner, waiting for the walk-light. I kept trying to catch

her eye, but it wasn't working. Then I had an idea. "Nina?" I asked. It was the first name I thought of.

"What?"

"Aren't you Nina?" I studied her features, tried determining if this girl could be the one.

"No."

"Oh, sorry. You look just like her."

I didn't know if she was the girl. I couldn't say she certainly wasn't or was. If she wasn't I thought maybe I could date her. "Stuck here over the summer?"

The light changed and we began to cross.

"Yup."

In the crosswalk I could tell she was trying to walk faster than me. At first I walked to stay alongside her, but then slowed down and let her walk ahead. On the next street she went right and I went straight. After that I knew I shouldn't try talking to another girl that I thought was the girl, but still, I wanted to find her.

I had been nervous at first, about driving without a license, but I got used to it. I felt as though I might never need a license again. Driving without a license only mattered if you got pulled over—and then it finally happened, I got pulled over.

I don't remember where I was going, I saw the cop tailing me and watched with so much focus I missed the red light. I thought getting caught would be a big deal, but it wasn't. He wrote a ticket, told me to call a ride and left. I waited about fifteen minutes, then got back in my car. I sped off, but needed to slam on my brakes when a cat darted in front of me. I hadn't forgotten

about my spirit animal. I didn't want it to be a cat, but I was pretty sure that meant it was a cat.

The cat ran to the left and on the next street I turned left.

I didn't see another sign, so I drove straight. After awhile, I was back on campus. The street I was following turned into a dead-end street, and I parked at the end of it. I didn't know what to do. I just sat there. I rolled my windows down. Listened to the birds chirp. That's when I saw the girl. I was sure she was the girl from the bed. She came down the stairs from a second level apartment in jeans and baggy sweatshirt. Her hair was pulled back behind a headband. She frowned at me when she walked past, and I frowned back. I told myself everything was okay, but the sky was blue and empty. Not a light, not a bird, not a sign. I panicked. Got in my car and followed the hills to a higher part of the city. The sun set like the world was ending, but it would set tomorrow too.