

The Girl

Justin had spent his entire life in South Dakota, with the exception of the last six months. The various towns he had resided in never seemed to stray more than twenty miles from where he was born; which was twenty miles from nowhere. The flat terrain and never ending skies had become all he knew. Now, the towering buildings of steel and glass blocked his vision, gave him claustrophobia and well, seemed unnecessary.

He rented an apartment in Lower Town of Saint Paul that was half the size and twice the price of the one he had had in Yankton. Starting a new life in a new town seemed exciting and adventurous before he had left home, but now it just felt cliché.

Making friends in a new place seems like it will be easy when you're surrounded by existing friends, but loneliness tends to leak in slowly and it's not like Justin hadn't attempted to meet new people. He frequented many places that could be described as social settings, bars, concerts, parks, but none of these locations seemed to attract people of similar interest. Or people of similar interest were not attracted to him. Many evenings he ended up just wandering Downtown. Sometimes he worked up the courage to stop in at a local pub for one beer and then headed home when the awkwardness set in.

Justin's job was also no help in igniting friendships, but data entry doesn't seem to attract personalities bursting with charisma. This occupation wasn't exactly what Justin had expected and it's not like he was anticipating an Indiana Jones adventure. It's just that Justin had believed the office would be bursting with eccentrics, willing to befriend him and drag him along on unforeseeable adventures. Once he arrived upon the conclusion that the majority of his co-workers were taciturn and reclusive, he began to wonder if this was a common personality trait in the area, or if his situation was unique.

One Friday evening as Justin sat at the end of Great Waters bar looking very uninterested, a young woman aggressively hopped upon the stool next to him. Her shoulder length brunette hair had the glow of being recently washed and her bright green eyes were unavoidable. Justin tried to stare straight ahead, but it was no use. He was lonely and she was beautiful.

"Hello," she said, with a slanted smile, "Is there any way I could buy you a drink?"

Justin was slightly skeptical of her forwardness. He took a small sip of his beer and replied, "I thought that was supposed to be my role."

"Let's just pretend it's Sadie Hawkins Day," said the girl, without that adorable smile ever leaving her face.

"You buy the first round and I'll take care of the second," said Justin, not trying to sound like a selfish, sexist dick. Which is how he felt right about now.

"Kind of presumptuous thinking there will be a second isn't it," replied the girl, with a sudden gaze of seriousness. Her poker face held out for quite some time (long enough for Justin to feel uncomfortable anyway) before that glowing smile returned and she held her fist up in the air. "I would propose a cheers, but I'm having a hard time getting this boy I kind of like to buy me a drink."

Justin extended his arm across the bar with his index finger pointing out. "Bartender," was all he could think to say. He was trying to be smooth, but thirty seconds had passed and the bartender; who was standing twenty feet away leaning on the bar and conversing with another patron, made no attempt to serve him. I'm living proof that life doesn't proceed at all like it's portrayed in the movies, thought Justin. He suddenly realized his hand was still embarrassedly hanging over the bar to no response.

The girl laid her elbows on the bar and tucked the lower half of her face into the crevasse her left arm had provided. It was a nice attempt to conceal her laughter, but her body movements immediately gave her away.

At this point Justin was about as comfortable as a pig farmer in Manhattan, but he was desperately trying to cover up the fact that he was inept at picking up women. Since this beautiful girl had approached him, Justin had suddenly felt that he had been endowed with a James Dean like suaveness. His stranded hand and the giggling girl next to him were forcefully pushing him to believe the contrary.

As Justin was beginning to realize that his brain was not going to contrive a plan to alleviate this ugly, awkward silence, the girl raised her head from the bar. She reached into her mouth and pulled out a piece of gum that Justin had been unaware she was chewing. Her arm moved at a very steady pace as she drew it back and just as steady, but slightly accelerated as she lobbed the gum towards the bartender. The gum lightly bounced off the bartender's cheek and tumbled to the floor.

Now, some people might detonate into a rage of obscenities and toss these two degenerates out on the street for an act like this. This particular bartender reacted as if he had just been pissed on by a fly; not quite sure what just happened, but almost positive it was a little gross and definitely inappropriate.

After shaking off his stupefied look, the bartender grimly looked at Justin and the girl and asked, "Is there anything in particular your upset about? Or are you just that discourteous." Not a word was spoken in response. The girl just pointed at Justin's empty glass and held up two fingers. The bartender replied with that same old sigh and shrug of the shoulders we have all witnessed a thousand times. Never having asked about the particulars of their order, he poured them two arbitrary beers. When he finished, the beers were slid half way down the bar and he resumed his conversation as if it had never been disbanded.

Justin quickly hopped off his stool to retrieve the drinks. In the process, his left foot became entangled with the lower rung of the stool, causing him to stumble as he departed. His feet pounded heavily as he struggled to regain his balance and after a few precarious steps, Justin stood up straight, hastily grabbed their beers and returned to his seat.

Justin's ungracefulness had only exacerbated his nervous nature, but for some strange reason, this particular girl didn't seem to mind. She radiated a quirky sense of confidence. Not the type that makes you feel inferior, but the kind that is welcoming, the kind that makes the socially incompetent feel comfortable and accepted. She smiled incessantly, laughed almost as much and drank pale ale at a pace that would make Charles Bukowski cringe.

One after another the pints disappeared, along with Justin's anxiety. When the conversation began to taper off the girl emptied her glass and asked in a polite tone, "are you going to have another or am I drinking alone?"

Justin was slowly beginning to feel the cloud of inebriation seeping in, but he was smiling, almost ear to ear. And not the kind of smile a lonely man just plops on his face in an attempt to appear content. This was a genuine smile, the smile of a child.

"A young girl might get taken advantage of drinking alone in an establishment like this," said Justin, while scanning the premises. Realizing the bar's elegance greatly exceeded his own, he shrugged his shoulders and added, "Or maybe not."

"That's a slightly serpentine way of saying you enjoy my company, but I'll take it as flattery nonetheless." She extended her arm across the bar, pointed her index finger out and said, "Bartender."

The bar keep responded with assembly line efficiency. “The same?” he asked.

“A shot of whiskey to wash it down with,” replied the girl.

“If I were wiser, I might think you were trying to get me drunk,” said Justin.

“If I was, would you try and stop me?”

Justin pondered the question for a few seconds. “No. And I don’t think the effort would yield many result any way.”

The drinks arrived and within the first five seconds the girl drained her shot. For a moment she gazed at the empty shot glass that dangled between her thumb and index finger, as if it had something deeply profound to say, then she gently set the glass on the bar. She turned and looked into Justin’s eyes with the same penetrating gaze. The silence persisted, but not in the egregious manner of previous silences, this time it felt natural. Justin held a drink in each hand, but continued to stare straight ahead, almost entranced.

The bartender’s fingers snapping three inches from Justin’s face broke the silence. “Last call Bonnie and Clyde. You want a night cap or the price for tomorrow’s headache?”

Justin quickly consumed his awaiting whiskey and replied, “Night cap.”

“None for me,” said the girl, “A lady never drinks in excess.”

The bartender chuckled and poured the lonely shot.

Without hesitation, Justin downed the drink and pulled a pathetic looking wad of bills from his pocket, hoping it contained enough to cover the night’s bill. As the pile of money was laid on the bar, Justin looked up at the bartender with an inquisitive look, diligently wishing he wasn’t going to have to ask if there was enough. The bartender simply nodded his head, grasped the money between his hands and walked away.

The girl was already standing and sliding on her jacket, so Justin followed her graceful lead. Side by side they headed towards the door, when Justin suddenly stopped. He stood with his eyes closed for a few short seconds, took a deep breath and soaked up the alcohol’s effect on his brain. Justin’s eyelids slowly freed up his vision to once again see her leaning against the door frame, showing off that gracious smile. This was the first time Justin had really seen her off the barstool. To say she was five foot two would be considered an exaggeration. She wore an old pair of Converse All-Stars that matched her personality but none of her other apparel. When she realized Justin had regained his composure, she made a slight nod towards the door and walked outside.

Justin crossed the threshold from the warm manufactured air and dim mood lighting into the brisk nighttime air that Minnesota’s falls always bring in slowly. Purely out of habit, he turned left outside the bar’s door and slowly began to stroll down Saint Peter Street. For the first time, the girl followed Justin’s lead, without ever inquiring where their destinations was or what the remainder of the night would hold. They walked methodically through the night, side by side, close enough that their arms brushed against each other as they swung in opposite directions. Saint Paul’s aging architecture cast a barely visible shadow on the street and the city blocks slowly passed by as the pair sauntered down 5th Street. The playful antics and public displays of affection that romantic comedies encourage us to believe always happen in these situations never surfaced, but being fully captivated by another’s presence is worth the weight of a thousand scripted flirtations.

Mears Park slid by, then the Farmers Market, gone barren after a day of bustling activity. Soon enough Justin’s front door came into sight; that old enticer of awkward moments, the place destined to bring up the question, what next? But none of that occurred and they collectively walked into the apartment as if they had resided there together for years.

The lights illuminated, exposing the apartment's meager size and Justin's inferior interior decorating skills. Justin took one step into the narrow kitchen that protruded to the left of the entrance and set his keys on the counter. He turned and leaned back against the counter, lifting his head from its usual Quasimodo posture to glimpse at his house guest. A few short seconds past before Justin took a slow step forward, but then paused briefly, seemingly unaware of what he was trying to accomplish. His guest mimicked his movement and slowly leaned forward. Their lips touched and at first moved almost lazily, at a pace so certain metronomes around the world drown in jealousy. Slowly the momentum grew, the intensity began to compound, the energy between them became dizzying and unmeasurable. And after an undisclosed period of time, they parted with grace and comfort. Naturally, a moment of stares and smiles ensued until the girl asked if she could use the bathroom. Justin took two steps back from the entry way into the beige carpeted, white walled living room and pointed to his right, down the only hallway present.

"You have to jiggle the handle," he said politely as she headed down the five foot corridor.

As the bathroom door clicked securely shut, Justin leaned his weight against the only other door frame in the hall, which led to his bedroom. His chin fell to his chest as he exhaled a deep breath and for the first time, Justin was not alone in this place. He felt strange, having company somewhere that was typically occupied alone, but it was refreshing and made him feel more at home.

Justin took a timid step into his bedroom and squinted as he flipped on the light switch. The bright department store light confirmed his suspicion that he had gotten sufficiently shit faced in the hours at the brewery. After two additional quick steps forward he turned around and sat on the foot of his twin mattress to rest.

Only one window occupied the bedroom, but its simple shape and size seemed to pull in the sun's leftovers like a vacuum. The intense square of light that was being cast on Justin's bed slowly crept onto his forehead and the beads of perspiration began to roll. As the light crawled across his eye lids they forced themselves open only to be immediately dropped back in place. Justin moaned in pain from the penetrating light and gradually began to sit up, hoping to avoid this mistake in his second attempt to see. What occurred was for worse than the sun's natural givings.

His heart kept the pace for the throbbing in his head, partnered with not an ounce of saliva. Justin's eye lids cautiously opened to a much more satisfying level of light, but the constant pulsating intensified. Quickly laying back down to alleviate his head trauma, Justin's brain once again absorbed the shock of unfiltered sunlight and in natural reaction, he suddenly rolled over. Twin mattresses are not generally known for their spaciousness and this one was no exception. Upon rolling over Justin accelerated for two feet at which point he was rudely stopped by the bedroom floor. For a few seconds Justin just laid there, face down, wincing in pain, but slowly his body rose upright.

Justin's feet reluctantly drug across the floor as he headed for the kitchen and quickly spotted the Marlboro Reds perched on the counter top. "Oh my wonderful, cancerous savior," he said out loud as he snatched up the cigarettes and headed for the door. With the door knob in hand, Justin noticed a small piece of newspaper pinned to the old wooden door. Using both hands he removed the detached piece of the money section and studied the pin closely. The small studded earring was heavily worn and the light green stone wobbled loosely in the middle,

causing the entire accessory to feel unstable. Justin shifted his eyes to the newspaper fragment and read the message penciled into the margin, "I borrowed \$1.50 for the bus, sorry. PS Think of all the things we miss out on while we're sleeping."

Justin read the note twice, then once again to ensure his poisoned brain was processing correctly. The stereotypical reactions occurred next, pondering, absorption and finally, the temporary blocking of all events associated with said note until at least two blocks and a cigarette were in the past.

The first steps onto the street brought bittersweet sunshine, agonizing, but at the same time awakening, like the first cup of coffee in the morning. Justin jaywalked across Broadway Street and turned right towards the Farmers Market. On the corner of Fourth and Broadway Justin paused to use the red brick building as a barricade from the wind and lit a cigarette. He leaned against the brick walls for the duration of the Marlboro, watching the continually moving market and remembering how desolate it had appeared the night before.

At the cigarette's end Justin began walking down Fourth Street. His blood flow increased and the cloud that hung heavily in his head slowly started to particulate. With every step he felt more invigorated. He was not alone in this Middle American city; there were people scattered in every direction, awaiting to be met. Each one with a contrasting perspective and a story to call their own. The thought of this set Justin at ease, realizing that we are very rarely completely alone. Justin turned left to cross the Wabasha Street Bridge and finally his thoughts lingered back to the preceding night. Halfway across he stopped and peered down at the growing currents of the Mississippi River. It was hard to not feel sad knowing that he would most likely never see that comforting smile again, but relationships cannot always be measured in duration. Influence can be eternal and Justin was having a hard time suppressing his optimism.