

It's a Friday night, and the apartment is still. I sit cross-legged on the center of my bed, worsening the cheap mattress's already-concave form. I fill the empty night by picking at my split ends and repeatedly turning my phone screen on and off. These are my obsessive behaviors I convince myself are only bad habits. Nothing new appears on the screen, and I experience only a mild disappointment. I brush the tiny coils of hair off the black, shiny surface of my phone and think about Lou Reed.

Lou Reed died, and fall gave way to winter. It's cold in the apartment, but I'm too stubborn to turn the heat on so early in November. I put on a large, gray hoodie that was left in the backseat of my car by a boy who was never my boyfriend. The sweatshirt feels thin like the lining is missing. I pick and worsen the small hole on the left cuff.

I played the album *Coney Island Baby* the first night Jake and I hung out, just the two of us. Leo had introduced us a few weeks earlier at one of his "major-ragers." We gave our brief bios to each other in the hazy green glow of the fish tank, clutching sweaty PBR cans in our fists. We made our way up the roof, watching backyard fireworks haphazardly light up the west side sky before he was ready to ask me for my phone number. I typed it into his phone while someone threw up in a potted plant.

For our first official date we went to an art opening down in Pilsen. The gallery was located in an old funeral parlor on 21<sup>st</sup> Street, a fact I found more interesting than whatever was hanging on the walls. The gallery was old and in need of repair, like most of the neighborhood. It was a warm night, though, and

people seemed content sitting on their crumbling stoops. After an hour of small talk with art school undergrads, I let Jake parallel park my car on Western Avenue, excited that the obligatory portion of the evening had been fulfilled. We sat around my kitchen table drinking a six-dollar bottle of red wine and getting up at regular intervals to share a cigarette out on the back porch. I don't remember our conversation, but I remember putting on the record. Standing up, I pulled down my red, cotton shorts and attended to the stereo system I had just bought from a guy on craigslist. The speaker wires sometimes cut in and out, but I'm not an audiophile and never thought to adjust them. With a practiced hand, I gently lifted and dropped the needle on the record. Assured in the selection I had made, I swung my hair over my left shoulder and sat back down in my chair, eager for his reaction. My thighs immediately stuck to the turquoise vinyl. I was melting, watching his stoic face.

It's easy to stay in a mediocre relationship, to be fooled by a person's smell or to take moments of kindness and imagine them more beautiful. Like the night we went to Goldstar Bar with his brother. Sitting in one of the coveted burgundy booths, he let me keep my hand on his thigh until last call. In the morning he made us breakfast burritos. Filtered through the dirty windows, the light was hazy and soft by the stove, making me think we were in a fish tank of our own. I sat perched on a bar stool as he brushed the hair out of his eyes and scrambled our eggs. There is also the memory of his face buried in my armpit, breathing deeply. I see his pale, freckled back almost translucent in the lamplight rise up with each inhale. I try not to move beneath him in a vain attempt to make

the moment last. These moments were lovely, but brief. What can I say, really? Even Lou wanted to play football for the coach.

Too often I found myself alone in Jake's bed, with him passed out on the yellow, cigarette-stained couch. Too humiliated to try to wake and drag his limp, heavy body up the stairs, I tried in vain to fall asleep. For comfort and companionship I would mouth the words from Lou Reed's version of *Romeo and Juliet*. *Something flickered for a minute, and then it vanished and was gone*. I knew exactly what those words meant, and knowing them made me want to cry. With time and distance I can understand how those words were spoken simply and without hurt. But cynicism and experience bring their own regret. I light my purple gargoyle candle on the nightstand next to my empty bed.

I spent a Sunday morning and afternoon crying for Lou Reed. Sunday morning, do you bring or breathe the dawn in? Probably bring. Lou, your poetry was nothing if not practical. I spent a Sunday mourning for you. I called my friend Jason in New York, with the unjust hope that he could offer me words of comfort or commiserate. He made me feel ashamed instead. Jason's dad died of brain cancer right after the first semester of our MFA program. I should be embarrassed for taking the loss of a stranger's life so personally. Flustered and even more upset, I said I had to go and lied that someone else was calling me.

Jason was right. I never met Lou Reed, but I did see him once when I was twenty-one and he was sixty-seven. For two hours, I stared at him with the intensity of a stalker and the reverence of a nun. The sky was threatening rain, and his black t-shirt was tight. He looked cool. Wearing wire-framed glasses, he

reminded me of my uncle Jim, a man who was a rebel decades before I was born. The earth squealed and shuddered to a halt as he drove his motorcycle in circles around the Polish-Catholic southwest side, leaving babushka-ed women making signs of the cross in his wake. When he told his mother Rose that he was getting married, she told the bride-to-be to find someone better. These days, Uncle Jim paints Bob Rossi-inspired landscapes in his suburban garage. I cringe as my grandpa reminds me that Jim and I are the two artists in the family. Jim still wears a leather vest and has been married for nearly fifty years. He is the Romeo in the song.

I can't remember what songs Lou Reed played that afternoon in Grant Park. Probably Walk on the Wild Side. Maybe Last Great American Whale? Was he at the Budlight stage or AT&T? Was it Friday or Saturday? I expected the crowd to be bigger, assuming my poet was everyone's. Lizzie and Alistair wandered to see what other bands were playing, but I hardly noticed their leaving. Hands across my chest, I gripped the gray straps of my backpack and rocked back and forth on the heels of my dust-covered sneakers. I whispered the lyrics I knew and listened intently to those I didn't. My eyes were fixated on the form of his body and guitar. I gave Lou Reed my attention because I wanted him to have something of mine.

I get up and flip to Side 2 of Coney Island Baby. Jason was wrong. I wasn't mourning the death of Lewis Allan Reed. I was mourning the death of Lou Reed, and man, did I know him well. I have carried his body of work with me in times of entertainment, pleasure, and dread. I have danced, sang, and cried

along with recordings of his voice, parroting words I understand and feel completely. I knew that life more intimately than the ones that belong to most of my family, friends, and lovers. So yes, this death did affect me on a personal level, and I will mourn my loss, which I'm sure I share with countless other romantics. Lou Reed's death meant the end of a creative career that I revered. There will be no more work, and the finality of that absolute is sobering.

Jake criticized me once for being too judgmental, for basing everything on the merits of hate, like, and love. I have liked and hated Jake, but I will always love Lou Reed. Alone in my apartment, Lou Reed makes me an unfamiliar promise, "*Man, I swear I'd give the whole thing up for you.*" I believe him every time.