

Call Waiting

Let me just say, I never really feel the need to explain myself or my decisions. But in this case, where otherwise, I'd find myself universally hated, I'll make an exception. I'm usually a very calm person, but with my luck I was targeted on a day I didn't find myself surrounded by my cloud of serenity. Then again, I was always a target in Venus's eyes, and I can't really be a target when I'm my own trigger man, right?

The most unnerving thought about the event is the way she held herself. A cheerleader, typical high school goddess who never steps with caution or nerves but instead steps with dignity, confidence and an overwhelming pride that puts other girls into a weakened sense of self-loathing. To find yourself in her path can be a beautiful thing or a disastrous one, just flip your coin and hope it doesn't land on the wrong side.

I can still remember it like it was two days ago the way she held her head high in the center of the Fair Veil bowling alley and said with a wickedly beautiful smile on her face "Martin, I'm pregnant."

The first thought I had in my mind was to run like hell, and sad to admit, I'm one to act on impulse. Stunned is a word that doesn't do justice to the melting pot of emotions boiling over inside me then, no, not even close. I couldn't find a suitably large reaction. Her friends watched from behind her, but to me their cheer uniforms just mixed together in a blurry dot of greens and blues lingering in the periphery of my vision.

Venus stood firmly, waiting for a response. Her twisted, bitch-goddess smile flattened itself out soon when she saw my nervousness. Behind her the girls all whispered to each other, or tried to at least in an attempt to coax a reaction from me with their words.

"Martin, say something," she said impatiently.

And that was when I made the choice. I watched the crooked, deranged smile twisted its way across my face in Venus' and I held up a single finger to her in a 'I'll get back to you on that' sense. Venus' face writhed in confusion as she held up her finger too, mocking my action in utter befuddlement. I turned away quickly and speed-walked the hell out of there.

I was sure that the cheer squad had already started their mixed chorus of *I told you so's* and sympathetic insults on my behalf. I didn't stick around for the show though, no sir. I thought this show would be best viewed short an audience member.

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I would be pounding the steering wheel of my van in overwhelming anger while the audience laughed and cried and threw their roses up on stage in celebration of the lovely ingénue who gave such a great performance: the lovely ingénue who had been betrayed, who in seconds had made me public enemy #1. To be fair, she should've expected this. We've been dating since I was a sophomore, she was a freshman, and yet, two years later she still doesn't know when I'll pull my usual "duck and run". I mean, anyone who knows me should know that it's my specialty.

My whole life I've been running; running from the law, running from my teachers, etc. I blame my dad. He took the easy way out when I was little. I'll spare you the details, but all I can say is that it was a very messy ordeal involving a revolver and what used to be his right temple. Ever since then, my life was everywhere but with me.

'Calm down' seemed like something I could try to tell myself, but the situation just wasn't suitable. There was no way I could calm down. The thought just kept striking me again and again like a broken record: a seventeen year old father in Fair Veil, Nevada. Over and over it played, I just wished that someone would shoot the DJ already. Put him and me out of our misery. I needed to talk to someone. I'd turn into Norman Bates if another *living* human didn't hear my dilemma. I whipped out my phone and called the only person I could think to.

"Hello," Hayden answered.

"Hayden, I did something terrible," I began.

Hayden sighed. "Martin, why do you always call me before you call your shrink?" He asked.

"Dude, this is serious. I have a real situation this time," I explained.

"Okay, I'm listening."

I gulped down my words. "Venus is pregnant," I said.

"Shit. Is it yours?" Hayden asked.

"Well I sure hope so!" I exclaimed. "Hayden, I don't know what to do! I'm only seventeen! I can't be a dad," I cried.

"Well, you gotta think about how she must feel, Martin. She's that MTV girl, the typical sixteen and pregnant and now she has a 'baby daddy' who doesn't even want to know her. This is almost as bad as if you skipped town on her," Hayden said.

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And just like that, a light bulb came on in my head. *Skip town, you say? Why, I just might do so.*

“Hayden! That’s a great idea! Thanks for the help,” I exclaimed.

“I wasn’t saying you should actually skip...”

It was too late. I had already hung up and was on my way to a new town. I’m sure that on the other end of the line, somewhere in Fair Veil, Nevada, Hayden uttered the phrase ‘Glad I could help’ to a neglectful father and now, a neglectful friend.

Subconsciously, I drove for hours. I didn’t pay attention to the signs because I didn’t care where I ended up, all I cared about was escaping where I started. I would stop only for gas and nothing else, paying no attention the cost but just feeding the pumps my debit card. I was more grateful now for my past savings that I ached to spend, I only hoped I hadn’t yet gone into overdraft. It wasn’t until I realized that the days merged to one, when I pulled over in Colorado.

The night was young, and the moon looked like the sky’s slanted smile in the black of the night. I found myself in the city of Aspen. It was snowing lightly when I pulled over on the side of the street at the flashing sign of a bar called “Glorious”. I finally gained consciousness of my actions and started toward the bar.

The inside of the bar was dull. A few men sat at a booth in the corner talking quietly over their drinks and staring blankly at the football game on the screen. There was an antique jukebox in the corner which lit up the whole room in an array of pinks and oranges and despite its old appearance still played music faintly in the background. At the bar sat two people: the first was an Asian girl around my age who was doodling in her sketchpad and the other a drunken man on the verge of passing out. Behind the bar stood a middle-aged Asian man.

I took a seat at the bar and cleared my throat. The bartender looked at me with an angry look in his eye. “I’ll just take some water,” I said nervously. The bartender nodded without a sound, and he poured me my drink, staring at me the whole time. I took out my wallet and put \$5 on the bar. “Keep the change,” I said quietly.

I put my head down on the bar and sighed. My mind was a mess. I couldn’t clear my thoughts in the slightest. Even two states away, Venus had a way of putting herself into my thoughts.

The bartender turned around to a door behind the bar. He unlocked it and stepped inside. I sat with my cup of water in my hand and looked at the TV screen. I didn’t follow sports but I

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watched the game anyway. When I'd looked up I noticed the Asian girl had hopped behind the bar and was standing in front of me. She wore a friendly smile on her face.

"What's the trouble stranger? You look real down," she asked.

"Nothing, I'm fine," I said.

The girl frowned at me. "I can tell two things about you already. You're not from around here and you're a bad liar," she joked.

I raised an eyebrow at her. "How do you know I'm not from here?" I asked.

"Well, the fact that you're about forty degrees under-dressed is a bit of a dead giveaway," she laughed.

I chuckled at this too. "Okay, you caught me," I said.

"Good. Now, you gonna tell me why you look so blue? Or would you like a drink first?"

I looked up at her curiously. "No thanks, I've already got a drink," I said as I shook my cup of water in my hand.

The girl laughed at this. "Sweetie, a frown like that needs alcohol."

She turned around and grabbed two glass bottles of beer and popped them open and slid them over to me. She then climbed over the bar and sat herself next to me. I didn't know how to respond to this. I was worried that when the bartender returned he would call the police. The girl held out her hand to me. Amazed, all I could think to do was to grab it and shake it.

"I'm Gloria," she smiled.

"Martin," I choked in response.

"Glad to meet ya," she said. She held up her bottle and clinked it to mine before saying "Here's to making new friends!"

Suddenly the bartender stepped back out of the room. He looked to us with the beers. I prepared myself to run, but all he did was sigh and look at Gloria shamefully. He stepped back into his room without a word as Gloria drank her beer silently.

"He's not gonna call the cops, is he?" I asked nervously.

Gloria shook her head with a smile on her face. "Oh no, of course not. You're with me, you're fine. He won't bother you."

I hesitated before taking a swig at my beer. "Do you know him?" I asked.

Gloria laughed slightly. "Not really. Not as well as I should, you know?" she answered. "He's my dad," she added.

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“And he lets you drink?” I asked.

“Well that’s where the ‘not really’ comes in. He doesn’t know me.”

The moment grew awkward. I wasn’t quite sure what to say back to her. “What do you mean?” I asked awkwardly.

“He uh, he left my mom when she got pregnant, so we’ve never actually met. I know he knows he’s just never really addressed it. So, I come in here and do just about anything I want.”

“Wow,” I said.

She laughed at this. “Yeah, I try to make the best out of a bad situation,” she joked. “So, how about you? Do you have daddy issues too?”

I took a swig of my beer before answering. “My dad killed himself,” I stated.

Her smile quickly flattened itself. “Shit,” she said. She took another swig. “How’d he do it? If I can ask that, I don’t really know how okay that is,” she said.

“No it’s fine. He shot himself. I was six and he was struggling with depression and that’s it,” I said. “It doesn’t really bother me, you know? He wasn’t around long enough to be missed, I guess.”

Gloria put her hand on my back. “Look at that,” she began, “we already have something in common.”

I looked at her in the light of the bar. She was beautiful. Her ebony hair just tickled her shoulders and her iridescent, pearl teeth showed something more than just a smile. They showed welcoming warmth that wrapped itself around me, and I was just intoxicated by her. Without even knowing why, my lips spread thin and made acquaintances with my ears and it was the first genuine smile that I could remember giving in a very long time.

“Hey, I just realized that you have yet to be properly welcomed to Aspen. You wanna get out of here?” she said.

I juggled the question in my mind briefly. *Am I moving along too fast? I just met this girl, but I like her.*

Gloria must have heard my inner monologue because the next words that she produced were “Opportunities only come once with the full moon.”

I chuckled nervously. “Are you my welcoming committee?” I asked cutely.

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Gloria grabbed the ends of her long, over-sized T-shirt and gave a traditional bow in the middle of the bar. “At your service, sir,” she gestured with a fake British accent.

She stood herself up really quickly in quirky embarrassment and flashed a matching nervous smile.

“Let me just get my things,” she said with a nod to the other side of the bar.

I sat contently and finished out the rest of my beer as she ran away to the other side of the long, now-noisy room. I was entirely enthralled by her exuberance and vivacious spirit and found myself wishing that there were more people like her in my life back in Fair Veil. Oh shit, Fair Veil. It was a strange realization but it came to me that I had, for a rare and brief moment, forgotten my own life and the problems I stirred up in it. I came to the haunting reality that I would have to face them when I returned, if I returned.

My hand began to shake from my nerves. Here I sat; two states over letting the feeling of cold, actualized adulthood pierce my thoughts. My entire body began to tremble in the barstool. I looked around nervously, hoping nobody would catch sight of my mild “mental Parkinson’s” episode. Unfortunately, my radar wasn’t accurate enough.

“You got a bad case of the nerves,” said a deep voice in front of me.

The deep sound of it alone made me nearly jump from my skin. I looked up in a desperate attempt to not seem caught off guard and found the bartender standing there looking down at me contently. I cleared my throat, stalling for an answer. “N-no, I’m just a little uh, cold. Yep just a bit chilly,” I said smoothly.

His head tilted back ever so slightly as he let out a sarcastic *ha!* “I know the difference between cold and nervous, and the cold has never put an expression like *that* on my face before. You gonna spill the beans or you just gonna sit there?” he asked slyly.

“No really, I’m fine. I’m not really comfortable telling everyone my life story,” I responded confidently.

The bartender turned around without a word and again opened the door to his tiny room. I tried my best to watch him closely but he disappeared into the shadows of the barely-lit room and re-emerged some thirty seconds later holding a tiny piece of cardstock. I could see it was printed on a sky patterned paper, the kind with the pretty clouds on it that people use to spice up work memos or invitations. Silently he handed me this beautiful little card and nodded to me. I

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couldn't feel it then, but the magic was there in that very moment hidden behind the uncertainty of my next move.

I read over its text just once before Gloria came back but the words hung in the air the rest of the evening. It read:

HEAVEN'S HOTLINE
1-800-HEAVEN
*You can talk us to **death!***

I didn't tell Gloria about the silent interaction with her father. I felt awful considering all the things I was already keeping from her but I felt that another little white lie wouldn't be detectable in the snow-blanketed plain I was trapping myself in. Gloria grabbed a six-pack of beers before we hopped out the door of the bar.

We ran through the snowy town, my hand in hers as she led me to a place she called "indescribable" and I followed blindly in the chilly night.

"You're gonna love it! It's the only good thing we have in this town, oh, beside me of course," she joked, "come on!"

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"I don't think this is such a good idea!" I screamed.

Gloria laughed at me, her breath visible under the twinkling white-strung lights above. "Come on, don't be a pussy!" she said.

"Where are all the ice skaters?" I asked, nervously.

"This place is a tourist trap, none of the locals come here, except me," she said.

Well, why not? I thought. I put my left foot on the ice and slid a little as I pressed my weight. Gloria stood at the center of the small lake, cackling at my expense. I flashed a little smile as I regained my composure and stood up straight. I was a little tipsy; we had finished half of the beers by the time we had got to the lake. Second foot. I couldn't believe I was doing it. I walked slowly into the center to meet Gloria.

"So," she began, "how does it feel to walk on water?"

I smiled at her. "Well, I can't say I do this back in Nevada," I said.

"Oh, so you're a desert boy?" she asked.

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“Born and raised,” I said.

She laughed at this. Her eyes twinkled beneath her glasses in the twinkling lights that were webbed between the barren branches of the trees. The ice shined beneath her feet, lighting her up like a goddess. Little speakers hanging on light posts around the lake played music gently. I don’t know whether it was the beer or my emotions but I hadn’t ever felt so drawn to somebody in my life, not even Venus.

“So is this the first time you’ve escaped?” she said.

“What do you mean ‘escaped’?” I asked.

She giggled at this. She was playful. “You know, escaped from your nest, your home town. Flown free? All that jazz,” she said.

“Oh, ha, yeah just trying to get away from what I know. It’s not as glamorous as we’ve been forced to believe in movies and TV,” I said.

“What? Are you kidding? I’d love to breakaway for once. Just see the world and the things it has to offer,” she said back to me.

She walked up closer to me, and put her hands in mine. “Our lives don’t always change the way we want them to,” she said.

I smiled at this. I pushed her away slightly, so our arms were fully extended. “That’s why, we have to make the changes ourselves,” I said. I started to spin her playfully, Ring around the rosy style across the ice.

“Martin what are you doing?” she laughed.

I laughed too, breathing in the intoxicating, frigid air of the Colorado night.

“Martin! Stop!” she cried.

We smiled with glee as we spun closer and closer to the edge of the lake. It was the first time I felt care free. The first time I had let loose and felt fully alive.

Suddenly she let go and I was thrown by my weight. I fell onto my side and slid across the ice into a snow mound. The contents of my pockets escaped my jeans and sprawled across the ice and snow, but I didn’t care. I lay in the snow laughing and catching my breath.

Gloria covered her mouth in quirky laughter. “I’m sorry,” she said nervously. “Are you okay?” she asked.

“Yeah, I’ll live,” I said happily.

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She approached me slowly; she was now carrying the near-empty six-pack of beers with her as she smiled down at me. She curled up next to me and popped open a beer for herself as she looked me in the eye. The music on the speakers changed to “Wild Horses” by the Rolling Stones, a tune I recognized from my childhood.

Gloria looked up at the sky, the stars bright despite the burning bulbs that webbed the trees above us. Her face was serene but hopeful. She sighed.

“Looking up at the sky makes me feel so small,” she said.

I shifted my gaze toward her.

“I mean think about it, this is one place in one state one planet. It makes me think of all the places I could go and the people I’ll meet. Makes me wonder how many of them will be touched by my life, and how many will touch mine,” she said seriously.

“So, if you’re so intrigued by the world, why don’t you leave this place? You know, take a chance?” I asked her.

She looked at me curiously. “Because, I always come back to the moments like this: the little things that make this place my home. How could we ever leave those things behind?” she asked me.

And with those words I was entirely overwhelmed. I leaned in slowly to kiss her, and felt my heart pounding beneath my ribcage. I never felt so nervous in my life. Our lips so close...

That’s when I heard the sound: the blaring, unending ring of my cell phone that suddenly pulled me back to the brutal reality of my life in Fair Veil. I was going to ignore it, when I saw Gloria reaching for the phone.

“Well, who do we have here?” she joked. She picked up the phone in her hands and smiled as she looked at the screen. Her smile suddenly dropped when she saw the name Venus on the screen and the photo of she and I kissing that came along with it.

“Who is it?” I asked nervously.

She snarled. “You tell me,” she said. She threw the phone into my arms and I looked down to the phone. I gazed at her speechless, the phone still ringing in my cold hands. I had no idea what I could possibly say to her. The look on her face was an unmistakable expression of anger, one I knew I couldn’t erase with any possible effort. I waited for her words.

“Answer it,” she said calmly. I pressed the speaker phone key on the screen. We were suddenly greeted by the crying voice of Venus.

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“Martin? Where the hell are you Martin?” Venus screamed. “I don’t know what to do here. I can’t believe you would do this to me. You said you loved me. I can’t raise a kid on my own,” Venus said.

Gloria’s face was burning red. I ended the call once I saw the stark, angry expression Gloria was carrying.

“Gloria, I can explain,” I said.

She exhaled loudly as she turned around and began walking toward her stuff she left on the other side of the lake.

“Gloria. Will you please listen to me?” I asked.

“Listen to you? Okay Martin, why don’t you tell me how you lied to me? Tell me how you abandoned that girl back there? Because I don’t think you want to tell me a story that hits so close to home,” she said, harshly.

“You don’t know what it’s like being in the situation I’m in.” I said.

She turned around suddenly. “No, you’re right, Martin, I don’t. But I know exactly what it’s like being in hers, being abandoned by someone who is supposed to love you. But you don’t care about that; you only care about protecting yourself. You’re too afraid to do the right thing! Why don’t you find another girl who knows Martin? Because I know I can find a guy like you anywhere I go: an asshole.” she said.

I felt myself getting angry with her. “I’m too afraid to do the right thing? What about you? Sitting every day in your Dad’s bar and never saying anything to him. I didn’t realize that’s what courage was,” I said coldly.

Her face froze. She was at a loss for words. The only thing that managed to escape her mouth were the words “Screw you, Martin.”

I watched her cross the rest of the lake and gather her things as she stomped off across the snow. I stood in the middle of the frozen lake already regretting what I had done. I walked myself back to my sprawled out belongings. I sat down and snapped open one of the remaining beers. The alcohol was reaching my head now, I could tell as my vision grew blurry. I started to gather my things that were situated sporadically around me.

I held my phone on my lap as I reached for my wallet when suddenly the card fell out, that magic little card that was given to me by Gloria’s father. I read over the text again, the sky print background a pain to my drunken mind.

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I laughed a little in my drunken state and thought *what the hell* as I began to dial the number. The phone rang and rang until finally cutting to emptiness. Someone was on the line, but no words were spoken.

“Hello?” I asked befuddled.

There was no reply. Unsure and needing to vent, I just decided to start talking anyway.

“I don’t know if anyone is there, but I need to just talk. I just need to get my problems out there. This is supposed to be an advice hotline right? Well, here goes,” I began. “I got my girlfriend pregnant and I ran away. I can’t be a dad this young. I’m just not mature enough for that, I’m only still a kid myself. I have so much left to do, a whole life to live of my own. But I don’t want to be a bad guy. I don’t want to disappear on someone who needs me too. Someone did that to me once, someone I could’ve used in my life. Maybe if they were there I wouldn’t be so messed up.”

There was some stirring on the other end of the phone. I knew that someone was listening to me, but why they remained silent was a mystery.

“Please,” I said. “Say something.”

“Martin,” said the voice.

It was all too familiar to me. A voice I hadn’t heard in years except in those few lucky dreams I would have from time to time. A tear rolled down my face as I made the realization of who was speaking to me.

“Daddy,” I whimpered. “Is that you?”

“It’s me, Martin.” My dad said.

“H-how is this possible?” I asked.

“Martin, you can’t stay here,” he said. “You have to go back to Fair Veil. You can’t leave that baby, not the way I left you.” He said.

My tears began to pick up. “Why did you leave me, Daddy?” I cried. “Why didn’t you want to be a part of my life? Don’t you love me?” I asked.

“I love you more than anything. And I don’t want that baby’s life to be like yours was. That baby needs a father,” he said. “Be the man I know you are.” The line went dead.



The next morning greeted me warmly. I awoke in the back of my van, unable to remember how I arrived there. I slid the door open and looked around as the town was lit by the pink and orange pastel colored sky. Today was the day I planned on driving back home. I got my stuff together and went round to the driver's seat when there was a tap on the window.

I looked up to see Gloria. I rolled down the window. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," I responded.

"Headed home?" she asked.

"Yeah, thought I'd do the right thing. I'm not as much an asshole as you might have thought." I said.

She smiled at this.

That's when I noticed the bags she had by her feet. One was a fully packed backpack; the other was a lightly packed tote, both sitting at her ankles in the fast-melting snow.

"What's with the bags?" I asked her.

"That's kind of why I'm here." She began. "I was wondering if you could help give me an escape." She said.

I laughed at this a little. "Where to?" I asked.

"I don't know, anywhere? Maybe see what's so bad about um..." she paused for my answer.

"Fair Veil, Nevada." I chimed in.

"Right, Fair Veil, Nevada." She said.

"Why are you doing this?" I asked.

Her eyes were heavy and hurt, and she wore that wounded puppy expression that we perfect as children.

"A great guy once asked me why I didn't take chances. I realized that having no answer isn't a good answer," she said.

I opened the door to the passenger side, and she smiled at me happily. She hopped in next to me eagerly and I looked down at her hands noticing the envelope she was holding. The word "Dad" was written on it in big pink letters.

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“What’s that?” I asked.

“Oh, right this. Do you mind stopping at my dad’s bar before we leave? There’s something I’ve gotta do,” she said.

“Sure thing” I said.

I pulled onto the road and began to drive; taking us away from the cold childhood we were so familiar with: driving us into a strange new life that we were meant to live. Being the man I was expected to be.