

# Alan Starks

Monday morning, like most mornings, Alan Starks awoke to the sound of tears filtering through the drywall. With his free hand he reached out for his phone on the nightstand, squinted at the artificial light, then sighed deeply in the knowledge that he would not be getting his last forty minutes of sleep. He sat up, wiped the crust from the corners of his eyes, scratched his neck and back, and looked down at Chelsea, fast asleep in the middle of the bed. The oily strands of her chestnut hair carried the aroma of cigarettes and stale beer. She turned over when he slipped his arm out from under her pillow. Pulling the comforter over her head, she continued on without him.

Down the hallway, Alan pressed gently upon the door to the spare bedroom. Light seeped through the white blinds. Outside, the chill of the Midwestern autumn was enough to make even a good night's sleep shudder and creep back under the covers. White clouds made for a low ceiling. Leaves and branches sagged slightly under early morning showers and shown as vibrantly as they had in the summer.

Baby Jayden peered out from the wooden bars on his crib. The wild, golden ringlets of his afro were flattened on one side. Ethnically he resided between his white mother and black father. Snot and tears streamed down cheeks irritated by a rare form of acne. Upon seeing his father, the look on his face was one of both panic and relief.

“There ya go,” Alan said as he lifted him out of the crib. “Hush, hush,” he continued.

Brushing aside several toys and a blanket, Alan laid his son out on the little table his parents had purchased for them at the shower. He undid the straps on either side of Jayden's diaper and gently pulled back to reveal a streaming mess. Alan calmly and swiftly took his son by the ankles, lifting him with one hand; while the other whipped out a succession of nappy

wipes. A moment later, Jayden's backside was glistening and scented. As Alan bundled him in a fresh cotton diaper he considered how good he gotten at the task. He couldn't drive a stick and he was a mediocre cook, but he could change a diaper blindfolded. "Tough, ain't it, little man?" he whispered to Jayden, "Tossed into this world, unable to speak, nothing makes sense, and on top of it all, you keep making these." Alan held up the soiled diaper.

Smiling, Alan asked, "That better?" Contented, Jayden nodded and Alan picked him up.

With a thumb in his mouth, Jayden rested his head on his father's shoulder as Alan carried him into the living room. The television played at a low volume. "Left it on, again," Alan muttered to himself, thinking of Chelsea and the electric bill. He flipped through the channels until he reached something light-hearted and whimsical, then left Jayden occupied on the couch while he prepared breakfast. A moment later, Jayden fingered through a tray of Cheerios and banana slices as Alan ran the water in the shower.

"Babe," Alan whispered with a hand on Chelsea's shoulder. "Babe, it's time to get up."

Chelsea, tangled in the sheet, rolled over, squinted back and forth between Alan and the clock, rolled over again and said, "Babe, let me have ten more minutes. Today's my long day."

"I need you to watch Jayden while I hop in the shower. It'll only take a few."

Chelsea groaned, and with one hand over her eyes reached out and patted around the nightstand for her phone.

"Can you get him dressed once he's done eating?" Alan asked from the doorway. He continued without waiting for a response. "I laid his clothes out on top of his dresser."

Chelsea sauntered out into the living room where she found her son staring vacantly at the television. She plopped down next to him and squeezed him in a long embrace. Kissing him

on the forehead, she played ignorant, “What's this, huh? Whatcha watching?”

“Gabba Gabba,” Jayden muttered.

“And who's that?”

“Too-dee,” Jayden mouthed the phonetic letter and the number.

“Here, mommy's gonna switch over to the news for just a second. We'll come right back.”

Once dressed, Alan found the two on the couch watching MTV.

“He's still not ready?” Alan fumed.

“Babe, I'm sorry,” said Chelsea, setting her phone down. “I lost track of time. I need to hop in the shower. He's finished eating and all ready to be dressed.”

“I'm still getting ready and I asked you to.”

“Babe, I'm tired and it's early and I ain't gonna fight about it. You're dressed. Just throw some clothes on him. It'll take a sec.”

Alan sighed. “Why's it gotta be like this every time I ask you for help?”

“Babe, I said I was sorry. I gotta get in the shower or I'm gonna be late for my shift. If I show up late and Chase is there, he'll write me up.”

“What were you doing while I was getting ready?”

“Okay!” Chelsea stood up. “You wanna get something off your chest?”

Alan cleared his throat, “What I want—”

“Babe, neither of us has time for that. You want us all to be late?”

Alan bit at the inside of his cheek and looked away.

Alan Starks divided his time between classes at Ohio State and an internship with Chase Bank. He left early in the morning and returned after dinner each night, carrying with him an assortment of textbooks, folders, binders, and loose documents. He was able to squeeze a desk into the bedroom to work. This left no other place for his large black filing cabinets but to loom awkwardly over Jayden's crib. Alan kept the drawers oiled and left a flashlight on top for retrieving documents late at night. He hadn't planned on being a father at twenty-four and often felt in over his head. Still, he intended to make the most of it. He had plans and was driven by an ideal of domestic life, absorbed subconsciously from his upbringing.

Chelsea was the assistant manager at the local Mervyns. When they moved, a year prior, she was able to transfer within the company. Each day they handed Jayden off to Mrs. Perkins, the retired elementary school teacher and elderly widow on the third floor. Prior to their arrangement, neither Alan nor Chelsea had spoken at length with Mrs. Perkins. They knew she lived alone, completed at least one crossword puzzle a day, and kept a mini photo album of her grandchildren on her person at all times. Those grandchildren were all in high school, though. At the apartment's summer BBQ, she made a fair offer and promised Jayden would be in good hands. So each morning at seven thirty, well into Mrs. Perkins's day, they would drop off Jayden.

Their place was small and far from the city, but it was cheaper and safer than the south end of Cincinnati. On a good day it was a half an hour commute into the city. In their two bedroom apartment the dining and living rooms were one. It wasn't glamorous, but at least the television was close. They were the youngest tenants in the building and found it difficult to make friends whenever there was a gathering.

“What are we doing here?” Chelsea continually asked. “When can we go home?”

The answer was always the same. “I've still got another year left, then we can talk about it.”

Both were native to Arizona, but Alan had spent a few years of his youth in the Midwest and was prepared for the winter. Gray skies, day in day out, made her outlook equally bleak. She became sluggish, called out of work often, and took to binge drinking. It wasn't just a seasonal disorder, but autumn and winter certainly didn't help.

On his way out of the office Alan was stopped by a few co-workers. Each week since his internship started he was invited to join some of the management for drinks and wings. Alan fit in well at the bank. He was sharp and he adapted fast. After three months, the occasional salaried employee approached him for advice or assistance. They saw big things in his future. Alan had never been one to shirk his duty or to half-ass a task, and with Jayden at home it was easy for him to keep focused. Everything he did was for the boy and his future.

Alan arrived home to the warm aroma of dinner and the sounds of television. These comforted him, and provided a simple stability for his life. As time went on, his home life grew closer to that of his childhood. He remembered each night when his mother would turn on the lamp in the living room and how its orange glow filled the room with warmth. He knew his father had arrived when he heard keys jingle outside the door. Following the birth of his own son, he took a long look at domestic life from the other side of the glass. He felt he was building something.

Chelsea had just finished preparing the fourth tuna casserole of that week, because tuna and macaroni were cheap. As long as it was salty, no one complained. She wasn't much in the kitchen, but neither was Alan.

The first year they dated, they practically vanished off the face of the Earth. Alan spent most nights at her apartment. They went through each others movie collections, took hundreds of seemingly identical photos of themselves, and made love as though the human race depended on them. Since Jayden's birth and Alan's internship, they were lucky if they were intimate every other week. It was the end of a three week drought.

Watching Alan come through the door, Chelsea felt void. "To be in love," she thought. "There was a time when all I wanted was to run away with him." Well, they did and what had come of it? She was depressed. She hated pinching pennies. Domestic life had become more of a chore than work. "Life is too short," she thought. She looked at her son staring vacantly at the screen and the man smiling behind him and felt bound to them out of obligation, not passion. "How did I end up this way?" she wondered.

In her claustrophobia Chelsea turned to other men. She was drawn to loud, careless types, the ones who spent hours sitting alone at sports bars just so they could talk to the servers. They were older men, men without families, or at least with families they no longer lived with. She could unwind in their company. Things rarely went beyond the parking lot. When Chelsea was out, she was the life of the party. What started as a monthly night out for herself, quickly devoured half the nights in her week. It wasn't long before Alan stopped waiting up for her. She would slink home, in the early hours, sometimes hoping he would wake. He never turned over.

Alan dropped his things on one end of the couch. In the kitchen, he wrapped his arms around her and went in for a kiss. She gave him a peck.

"It's just about ready," said Chelsea. "Go wash up and we can eat."

“You hear T.I.'s coming in November?” Alan asked as he unbuttoned his shirt.

There was a pause.

“Yeah, Josie sent me a link,” Chelsea answered without looking up.

Alan continued from the back bedroom while hanging his clothes, “You wanna go?”

“Mm, maybe. Can we afford it?”

Alan returned chuckling, “If that's what you're worried about, then don't. It's my treat.

How long's it been since we had a night out together?”

Both were acutely aware that it had been two months since their last night out together.

And neither could forget how that night dissolved into screaming and shouting.

“I'll think about it,” said Chelsea.

The three sat around one side of the dinner table so they could see the television. The back of the couch was close enough for Alan to rest his elbow on. Afterward, Chelsea did the dishes while Alan got Jayden washed up and ready for bed. In the bath, Jayden tried to eat any large bubbles he saw. It never worked because any time he saw one large enough for him to consume, he would swat wildly at it until it popped. Occasionally, he would hold one in his hand long enough to see his glossy reflection before it too popped and startled him. Then he moved on to swatting more.

Alan tiptoed backward out of Jayden's room, leaving the door slightly ajar. Turning around he bumped into Chelsea on her way to the shower.

“You getting in?” Alan asked.

“Yeah,” replied Chelsea softly and avoiding eye contact. “Some friends want to meet up.”

“Who?”

“Some girls I met at The Arena.” Chelsea strengthened her tone. “Don't worry about it.”

“It's Monday night. I thought we could relax and watch something.”

“Not tonight, babe.” Chelsea maneuvered past him into the bathroom.

Alan scratched at the back of his head. “How many nights a week do you have to go out?”

“What?”

“How many nights a week are you going be out?” Alan repeated firmly.

“What are you keeping track?”

“You know what I'm talking about.”

“Alan, I've been cooped up in the apartment since five, I got invited out, and I don't see what the deal is.”

“It's not just about tonight. It's about how you been coming home at two or three most nights. It's about how I never see you anymore.”

“I'm sorry, Alan! I don't know. You want me to call and cancel? Huh?”

Alan exhaled. He leaned back against the wall and knocked a picture onto the carpet. The glass cracked.

“Is that what this is about?” Alan asked. “Is this about the move and leaving Phoenix?”

“You want me to lie? I don't like it out here,” declared Chelsea as she waved her arms around. “None of my friends are here, I miss my parents, there-is-nothing-to-do-here. Do I have to go on Alan?”

“Babe, it's only temporary.”



Chelsea ignored him.

“Look, I know it's tough. I know that I'm not around as much and that it,” Alan paused. “It hasn't been like it used to.” He picked up speed, “But you're working too, you know? You're not always around. And I don't like it either. It's just the way it's gotta be for now.”

“I'm sorry.” Alan wrapped his arms around her. “I know it's been a difficult transition.”

“I hate being stuck in this apartment.”

“Look, Jayden's asleep,” said Alan. “Why don't we make some popcorn and relax. We can watch whatever you like.”

Chelsea slid from his embrace. “I told you, I'm going out.”

“But what about what we just talked about?”

“Babe, I'm going to be late!” Chelsea shouted.

Alan leaned in and kissed Chelsea on her cheek and neck. The toilet seat jutted awkwardly between them making it uncomfortable for the two to stand in the bathroom together. He nibbled on her ear and she brushed him off.

“Babe, I need space. I'm trying to get ready.”

Chelsea didn't come home that night, or the next, or the day after that. By the end of her first day of absence, Alan had so much pent up anger that the slightest mishaps had him splitting at the seams. During work he was short with colleagues, wore nothing but a frown, and let several clerical errors, errors that a week prior he would have been ashamed to miss, slip by him. He wasn't himself. He couldn't see himself. He defined his entire reality by his relation to Chelsea. He was like a toddler separated from its mother, a plant without sunlight, a worm dried out on the pavement. The next morning when he stubbed his toe on the dresser, a tear crept out

his eyelid. He clenched his teeth until he heard the enamel creak, then kicked the wooden side, sending bolts of pain through his foot.

On Thursday, her third day of absence, Alan went to work more determined than ever to get focused and return to his earlier standard. “Homelife is homelife,” he told himself. “You check that shit at the door.” It was short lived, though. An hour after sitting down at his desk, he was called into his supervisor's office for a meeting. He was told everything he knew already—he looked fatigued and that his performance was slipping.

“Pardon my asking, but is there any trouble at home?” asked Ed, his supervisor.

“No. Just been having trouble sleeping.”

“Is it the stress of the job?”

“No,” Alan paused, then fumbled over words. “Just been, ah. Just been a long week.”

There was silence between the two as Ed looked him over. His lips made their familiar smacking sound and he asked, “How old are you?”

“Twenty-four.”

“You have a child and you're married?”

“I have a little boy, yes. And I live with my fiancé. Why?”

“Just curious,” answered Ed cautiously. “How is your fiancé? What did you say her name was, Christine, Christy?”

“Chelsea.”

“Chelsea,” Ed repeated. “And how is she?”

“She's fine. She, uh,” Alan searched for words. “She's away on vacation for the minute.”

“Oh yeah? Back in Phoenix by chance? That's where you two are from, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Has it been tough for you two?”

“How do you mean?” Alan asked.

“I mean the transition, the job, the climate. Has it been difficult?”

“It can be,” Alan answered with tight shoulders. “It's been a rocky year but we get through it.”

“More power to you. Samantha and I met in New York while I was going to school. After my classes, her volunteer work, sleep, blah, blah, blah, we had a handful of hours together, each week.”

Alan let his gaze drift across the pictures on Ed's shelves. He saw trips to Key West, Cancun, Las Vegas. The happiest moments of Ed's life displayed like trophies.

“Then, shortly after we moved in together she got pregnant with our son, Lawrence. I remember the afternoon she broke the news to me. I was scared shitless. I mean deep down I was overjoyed. We were deeply in love, but I had no idea how we were going to make it work. There was something romantic about living on a shoestring budget with her, but throw a kid into the equation and it felt like poverty. She sold her car, we moved to the suburbs, I took a second job and Samantha dropped most of her volunteer work and got job as a server. Those were rough years and there's not much to look back on. In fact,” Ed laughed, “Occasionally I'll revisit that era in dreams and wake thanking Christ it's over with. Sometimes Samantha does as well, and we can laugh about it. Eventually things take shape and you get a better grip. And one day at a time, remember. But don't hold on to the future tightly. Handle your business on a daily basis.”

Alan shifted uncomfortably in his chair. He had avoided nearly all personal interactions with co-workers and somehow he ended up deep in a heart-to-heart with his boss. Ed could see through him and he hated it. He felt shame at being figured out. His confidence dropped, and he

was visited by the long forgotten anxiety of being called up to the front of the class to have a word with the teacher.

“Thanks,” said Alan with little enthusiasm. “We get by.”

The room fell silent and Alan held onto the arms of the chair, ready to leap up, waiting impatiently to be dismissed.

“Well, I don't mean to lecture you. You've got a good head on your shoulders and the work you've done here has been top-notch. However, I do think you should take today and tomorrow off.”

“Sir, I won't need—”

“Nope. Already been decided. Start your weekend. Rest up, spend some time with your boy.”

Alan's face carried a look of dismay.

“Starks, it's an internship. You're not getting paid and you've got my approval. Take the time.”

And so Alan returned home. He dropped his things, then climbed the stairs to the third floor to Mrs. Perkins's apartment. After knocking once, she called out, “Just a minute!” Alan didn't knock again but she assured him three more times that she was on her way. Mrs. Perkins was a short woman in her sixties. She had a long nose, large ears and short curly gray hair. Her appearance, sans hairy feet, was unmistakably that of a hobbit— an inside joke between Chelsea and Alan. The apartment décor hadn't advanced beyond the nineties. It was beige and pastels, top to bottom. On the shelves, tables, and counters sat a variety of blue, white, and brown porcelain cats, all small enough to hold with one hand.

“Here, sit, sit. I'll make you a cup of coffee. Or would you like tea? All I have at the moment is Chamomile, but if you'd like I can pour some water over my Chai from earlier. There's no more caffeine left in the bag but it tastes all the same,” Mrs. Perkins assured him.

“No, don't trouble yourself,” Alan cringed. “I can't stay long.” He never stayed longer than a few minutes.

“I haven't seen Chelsea in few days. Is everything alright?”

Alan raised an eyebrow. “*Had she heard,*” he wondered.

“Yeah, she's just out of town for a few days.”

“Oh, and where to?”

“Her parents',” said Alan.

“In Phoenix?” Mrs. Perkins asked, aghast.

“Yeah.”

“I heard arguing the other night. Is everything alright?”

“Yes,” said Alan, annoyed. “We're fine. I'm in a rush though so we'll have to talk later.”

Alan lifted his son in one arm while throwing the strap to Jayden's bag over his other shoulder.

“If Jayden needs a place to stay, or if you two just need some time, he's always welcome to stay with me. As you know, he'll be in good hands.”

“Thanks Mrs. Perkins, but that won't be necessary. I have tomorrow off, so I'll have him.”

“Oh, how nice. You two will finally get to spend some time together.”

“*What's that supposed to mean?*” Alan thought to himself. “Yeah,” the word left him slowly. “Have a good one, Mrs. Perkins.”

The next day, Alan took Jayden to a park down the street. They walked, and when Jayden grew tired Alan carried him on his shoulders. The playground was quiet, with only a handful of parents and their toddlers playing. Jayden had a difficult time walking across the wood chips, which he was fond of shoving in his mouth whenever he fell. He loved the playground. He delighted in walking across the bridge but held onto Alan's hand for support. He was prone to fits of excitement where he would scream, with a beaming smile, and slap his hands on anything around him. He loved to feel the wind across his cheeks and through his curls as Alan pushed him higher on the swing. He asked again and again to go down the slide and each time he reached the bottom, just as the experience reached its climax in a rush of speed and gravity, he looked surprised it had turned out that way.

The trip to the playground did more for Alan than he could have predicted. Separated from all other responsibilities, he was able to relax. Jayden's excitement brought him joy. As they left he wondered why they didn't come to the park more often. The open air and room to move around had been like therapy. And in that realization, he thought of Chelsea. He thought of her cooped up in the apartment in the evenings while he was at work. He missed her. He wanted to hold her, tell her he was sorry. But in his heart he knew wasn't being honest. Chelsea left because she wanted to. If she stayed, it was because she wanted to. No one, including her parents, had ever forced her into anything. She was determined in that way. It was for this reason that Alan hadn't contacted her. He feared addressing the issue and opted to avoid it for as long as possible. But he craved reconciliation. He wanted to be together again as a family.

That afternoon, Alan called her. No answer. He called again, an hour later. Still no answer. So he sent a text, spanning three messages, telling her he wanted to talk, that Jayden missed her, that he missed her, and that she should come home. She didn't respond but showed

up, unannounced, the following day. She passed Alan and Jayden as though the room were empty. She went straight to their closet, pulled down her suit case and began cramming it full of clothes, shoes and underwear. She pulled things indiscriminately as though there was no time to consider.

Alan knocked on the open door. "Can we talk?"

"Yeah, gimme a minute," answered Chelsea without stopping.

Alan watched her pack. Certain of what was happening, he decided he was confused.

"Why are you packing?"

"Babe, I said just a minute."

"I don't wanna wait," Alan shouted. "I wanna talk now!"

Chelsea stopped, dropped the clothes she held, and pursed her lips. "Okay, let's talk." She took a seat on the bed.

Alan, lifting the folding chair from his desk, knocked a glass of the desk onto the floor.

"It's just water. I'll get it later," said Alan. He inhaled deeply and let it out, feeling the muscles in his neck loosen. "I know it's been tough this past year. We've been through a lot since Phoenix. Shit, we knew it was going to be hard, but this is something else. I want you to know that I love you and appreciate everything you do for this family. And I—"

"Babe, babe, please," Chelsea interrupted.

"What?"

"Babe, it's over."

"It's what?"

"It's over. I can't do this anymore."

"Why?" Alan blurted out so quickly it surprised him.

“Cause I'm miserable, that's why. I hate this apartment, I hate this fuckin' place. I'm tired of living out in the fuckin' town. There's nothing to do here, it's full of middle aged hicks, I have no friends. And I'm just supposed to sit around while you work everything out?”

“I'm working- no, we're working for a better future.”

“What future,” Chelsea spoke softer. “I'm twenty-three. This isn't my life. Babe, I'm sorry. It's not the future I want.”

“What about Jayden?” Alan asked. “What's it going to be like growing up?”

Chelsea opened her mouth but stopped short. She looked away and said, “Plenty of kids grow up with separated parents.”

“Mine didn't! Yours didn't! I want my son to grow up with both his parents.”

“He will!” Chelsea shouted. “He will.”

“So this is it? This is how four years ends? You're just quitting on us? That's it? Have you even thought this through?”

“Yes! Everyday. From the moment I wake up ‘til the second I fall asleep, yes!” Chelsea looked straight at him for the first time in their conversation. “We both know it hasn't been good. We've been drifting apart since I got pregnant. I think you know this is for the best.”

Alan felt inflated with hot air. He wanted to shout. He wanted to sling horrible and vicious words at her. He wanted to bring her down to his level, but he couldn't. There was nothing in his plans for a family or the future that could see to this. He felt a defeat so paralyzing, no void was vast enough for him to vanish into. “What do we do?” he asked. The words crept slowly from him.

“I'm going to stay with my folks. When I get back in a few weeks we can talk.”



Chelsea packed the rest of her things. On her way to the door she bent down, kissed Jayden on the forehead, told him she loved him, then left.

Alan remained seated for what felt like hours. He cried, bit his lip, cursed every action he ever took, especially every moment with Chelsea. After ten minutes, any hope he had of her walking back in eroded, and he remembered Jayden in the living room. He found his son playing on the floor, unaware of the previous moment and ignorant of how it would shape his fate, irrevocably. Alan sat him on the couch next to him, turned on the television, and they both watched. They watched until the sun set and cool breeze lifted the blinds. Alan shivered. Noticing it was nine o'clock, he fixed Jayden a snack, got him washed up and put him to bed. He spent the rest of the night wondering where he went wrong.