

The Filigree of Infidelity

Just a little more off the top. Perfect.

I tiptoed my way up Broadway as though the mayor had declared a state of emergency limiting how fast any member of the public could walk on city sidewalks. My one and only prerogative was clear: *Do ... Not ... Sweat.*

It wasn't so much the unseasonably hot weather that had slowed the city down to a fifth of its normal pace; it was the humidity. Each block felt like its own little greenhouse, right down to the stagnant air and fat droplets of condensation clinging to the storefront windows. I presumed it to be that last gasp of summer in which the city straddled the line between being overly ripe and slightly rotten, and in just another day or two the stale heat would break for good and be replaced by a steady flow of crisp autumn air cascading down from the north.

Nikki and I hadn't seen each other in well over a week and I was doing everything I could to preserve my freshness. Beyond showering, I had just spent the better part of an hour meticulously landscaping every last follicle of hair between my navel and my knees. Freshly trimmed and shaven parts tend to sweat and stick to each other more readily than when left *au naturel*, and I didn't want to jump into her bed after such a long hiatus with clammy equipment.

Broadway was among my favorite thoroughfares in all of New York City. It functions as the scoliotic spine of Manhattan, twisting and turning its way along the entire length of the island. Each mile varies wildly in attitude as it soaks up the local flavors and customs of the neighborhood it happens to be running through, giving the thoroughfare as a whole something of a multiple personality disorder. Of course its most well-known identity is that of the Theater

District, home to plays, musicals, Times Square, and all those tourists who come from all over the world to gape at such things. But on either side of the Theater District a far greater proportion of Broadway is calm and residential, a fine place to find a patch of shade and rest.

I managed to find just such a spot tucked against the sandstone exterior of an apartment building. I leaned my back against the cool wall and lifted the front of my shirt to help ease my temperature back down. Small beads of perspiration had started to speckle my forehead. I gathered them on the back of my hand and flicked them off into quarantine before they provoked the rest of my sweating mechanisms into gear. If I tried to press on just another block or two further I risked triggering a runaway thermal reaction that would've soaked me from head to toe. This was the longest my girlfriend and I had ever been apart and I wanted to avoid that wet beaver look, as if I had just crawled out of the Hudson.

All morning I'd been brooding over the fact that the weather around the city tends to have this god-awful habit of being exceptionally pleasant during the work week, then turning downright hostile for weekends as though it had some kind of reverse-case of *The Mondays*. Mother Nature was clearly going out of her way to offend me, so in a fit of frustration I kicked my head back towards the sky and scolded her. *I'm onto you! Every weekend you pull this bullshit, you slag!* In return, a plump globule of water fell out of the sky and smacked me square in the forehead, shattering into a thousand tiny shards. *Christ, even the buildings are sweating.*

Getting hit by skyscraper spit is a New York City baptism of sorts. Sooner or later everyone gets splashed by falling liquid of unknown origin. All you can do is wipe it away and pray that the worst thing it came out of was the back end of an air conditioner.

My attention turned from the weather to my plans for the rest of the day. I figured Nikki and I would spend the afternoon seeing how many times we could put her birth control to good use. Afterwards, I was going to take her out to a new restaurant in Soho. It was rather posh, the kind of place so high-end they don't even bother to list prices on their menu. But I didn't mind. I was in the mood to splurge, and for good reason: it was our six-month anniversary. Over dessert I was going to surprise her with a pair of tickets to her favorite opera, Lucia di Lammermoor. I didn't particularly care for opera myself, but I missed my sweetheart and I wanted her to know it.

"Delivery! Seth's Pizza—you ordered a pie, extra sausage," I called out in jest, lightly rapping my knuckles against Nikki's apartment door. I heard footsteps approach and the deadbolt turn over.

"But I didn't order any ... Oh, hi," she answered, looking startled by my unannounced presence. "This is a surprise. How did you know I'd be home? I figured you would've called first," she remarked. "The other day you said your train would arrive by mid-morning. And I've missed you too," I replied, kissing her on the forehead.

"Speaking of surprises, I can't believe you just opened the door like that, *especially* since you didn't order anything. What if I was a serial killer posing as a pizza deliveryman?" I asked. "Why on earth would a serial killer go through the random effort of climbing to a fifth-story walkup?" she replied with a scowl. "My dear, you're presuming that the most unreasonable kind of person is going to act in a reasonable way, that's why. Besides, what if this person was specifically targeting you? Any maniac can use the mailboxes down in the lobby to ascertain precisely which apartment you live in. Then it wouldn't be a random act at all and instead be the work of a rather cunning serial killer. Which, by the way, I don't think people give serial killers

enough credit for being so cunning. I mean, any idiot can just murder someone. But to get away with it so many times that people consider you a *serial* killer? Now that takes a whole hell of a lot of devilish wit. No?”

Nikki wasn't in the mood for a playful debate and ignored my repartee. Instead, she went about separating the clothes on her bed, placing some back into their rightful drawers and the rest into her hamper. I understood why she wouldn't necessarily be in the best of moods. She'd been bouncing up and down the eastern seaboard for the past week and the worst part of any trip was always the very last leg—that nerve-splitting run between Penn Station and home, dragging the full weight of your luggage through a dank maze of underground passageways being accosted by beggars, buskers, and vagabonds every step of the way.

I took a seat on her couch, leaning forward so my back wouldn't sweat. Nikki's partly-zippered purse lay on the coffee table in front of me. Inside, her digital camera sat nestled against a crumpled pack of cigarettes and a compact mirror. I pulled it out to go through some photos, hoping to find something interesting to talk about and take her mind off the unpleasantness of unpacking.

I barely turned the camera on before Nikki noticed it in my hands and seemed to make a grab for it. “What are you doing?” I asked. At first she didn't have an answer. “I want to see the pictures of your trip. Did you just try to grab the camera?” I held the camera away from her as she eyed it nervously. “Don't be silly,” she said, “of course I want you to see the pictures I took. I just haven't had a chance to go through them yet and I want to make sure none of them are for my eyes only.” She curled her index finger back and forth, silently instructing me to hand the camera over. “I don't know how a week with your family and then a sorority reunion would produce any pictures that were for *your eyes only*,” I replied. She rolled her eyes and huffed.

“Well, if you must know, the girls and I drank a little too much for our own good last night and for all I know we took compromising pictures of ourselves. If so, I don’t want you seeing my friends in such a state just as much as they wouldn’t want you to see them either,” she argued. “Oh please. I’ve seen most of your sorority sisters in every kind of *state* imaginable—both clothed and otherwise. Remember the Catholic Schoolgirls mixer our senior year? Yeah, don’t forget that was your sorority and my fraternity going at it like a bunch of hustlers. So relax, these veteran eyes have already seen it all.”

Being the former president of the sorority Nikki was keenly aware of the debauchery that took place that particular night. Only in hindsight could those involved even begin to grasp how far it devolved into a severely hedonistic indulgence, one that went so far beyond the boundaries of good taste that the sorority issued a self-imposed gag order to never speak of it again. Having experienced it together, Nikki understood my argument. And in recognition of its merit, she was resigned to squeezing in next to me on the couch and anxiously await the first picture to appear on the camera’s LCD screen.

“That’s it?” I asked, scrolling through a handful of shots. “The last picture you have on here is of you drinking a Passion Bucket at Blondies, and I can tell from the front window it wasn’t even totally dark out yet. The rest of the night is missing and you didn’t even take any pictures of you and the girls eating breakfast this morning at Fay’s. *A little* too much to drink? Why do I have the feeling that’s an understatement?” I laughed off her nervousness. Nikki appeared visibly relieved that she didn’t take any more photos throughout the night.

Behind my smile, though, I was disappointed in her. Together we’d remained sober for a month straight and while she was free to drink anytime she wanted, I hoped she wouldn’t. Furthermore, Passion Buckets were the lowly sorority girl drink of choice at our old college bar,

a cheap yet viciously potent concoction of clear liquors and fruit juices served in a pitcher ... for one. The odds of blacking out on the stuff were always fifty-fifty and I thought her days of binging on low-rent swill like that were over. We were graduates now. I had a promising career in finance and she was on her way to law school.

“I skipped Fay’s. I felt like shit when I woke up this morning and just wanted to get out of town. I had a cab take me to the train station. I don’t think I could’ve eaten anything anyway,” Nikki lamented. “At Fay’s? Nonsense. You know her food is a cure-all for everything, especially hangovers.” Nikki drew a slight smile and picked at the chipped polish on her fingernails. I don’t think she knew how exceptionally desirable she looked just then. If I told her so I’m sure she would have been dismissive about it. But to my eyes, sitting there curled up on the couch in skimpy athletic shorts, wearing an old t-shirt that had gone through the wash so many times the fabric was no more than a few microns thick, casually braless so that her slightly agitated nipples were ever-so-seductively apparent ...

I reached over and tilted her chin towards me, following through with a prolonged kiss. She hardly kissed me back but I was unconcerned. She just needed to be eased into the mood.

I untangled her folded arms and gently lifted off her shirt. Her neck was bare. She wasn’t wearing the black pearl necklace I had given her the first time we said we loved each other. I hoped she hadn’t lost it, but I wasn’t going to worry about that now.

Nikki stiffened with hesitation. “Relax,” I whispered, laying her out on the sofa. I peeled off her bottoms and slowly slid my lips down her neck, sternum, and stomach, subtly pausing between each region to make eye contact and offer a seductive smile.

“Seth don’t—I feel filthy. I haven’t even showered yet.” She winced and drew her knees together. “Shhh,” I faintly shook my head in disagreement. “You couldn’t be any more perfect.” I eased her knees apart. Starting at her navel, I dragged the tip of my tongue further down. As my head dropped between her legs I could tell my persuasion had put her in the mood—she already smelled like sex.

“Stop.”

It was a jarring word to hear in that position. I immediately felt uncomfortable in a way that I never had before. We withdrew ourselves and she quickly put her clothes back on, trembling.

“I can’t do this,” Nikki said with a whimper. She sat at the far side of the couch, her head buried in her hands. “I don’t want to live with this on my conscience. I have to say it. I was with Oliver last night. I was really, really drunk and we ...”

She couldn’t say it. She didn’t have to. Oliver was her ex-boyfriend, a townie who lived near our alma mater. She dated him right before me. “I swear it wasn’t planned. I was at Blondies with the girls and he just walked in. It all happened so fast. Before I knew what was going on one thing just led to another. I’m so sorry.”

The hands on Nikki’s kitchen clock withered and fell. The walls breathed, expanding then compressing and expanding then compressing again, making me feel ill with motion sickness.

“You and I haven’t been out drinking in so long. I completely lost my tolerance. Everybody was ordering shots for everyone else and I just got carried away. I blacked out. The

person that did that last night wasn't me—you know I wouldn't do something like that on purpose. Please forgive me," she wallowed.

My head despondently wagged back and forth in stunned disbelief. A million words of love and pain hung from my quivering lips just waiting to be spoken, but nothing came out. It felt like I was choking.

"I know how badly I fucked up. We've been sober for so long now. But I can't tell you how scared I've been the whole time. I felt weaker every time you told me that you felt stronger, like I was just getting closer and closer to falling back on old habits until it finally happened. I need your help, Seth. I slipped up but I know I can quit for good this time. Please, help me Seth," she pleaded. I didn't know what she meant. Nikki unzipped her purse the rest of the way and tilted it toward me so I could see inside. It was filled with a handful of cocaine baggies, some empty, some still full, the same style pouch that my former drug dealer used. I pulled them out, spreading them across the coffee table.

Nikki eyed me with apprehension. She was hoping for sympathy but expecting rage. She got neither. I was still overcome by the overwhelming magnitude of what she had done. I tried to speak for no other reason than to break the long silence, but all that came out was a strained gurgle, like she had fractured my windpipe.

My vision blurred. All that remained in focus were the glassine pouches of cocaine on the table. An uncontrollable thirst washed over me. I ripped open the nearest baggie and dumped its contents out, using my Metrocard to carve out a jagged line and frantically sniff it up. I carved out another, then another still.

“Please don’t. Please stop!” Nikki cried out, pulling at my wrist. “Don’t do this to yourself. You’ll only make it worse. I feel bad enough already!”

The cocaine went to task numbing my lips, my gums, my face. I did another line. I wanted it to numb everything.

Nikki approached hysterics, trying to blurt out any combination of words that might help the situation. “I know you must think I’m gross right now. I’m going to shower, ok? I’m going to scrub this disgusting filth off my body and afterwards I’m going to do anything—*anything*—you want for me to make this better. We can go back to the way things were. We can be intimate. Why aren’t you saying anything?! I swear I made him wear a condom. We barely touched. It was over right away and I immediately knew I had made the biggest mistake of my life. Seth, I swear, it was nothing compared to what we’ve done. It was nothing compared to what we have!”

Her desperate plea only made what went on between the two of them more real, more painful as its vivid imagery played in a loop over and over again inside my head.

I grew more maniacal with my binge, dumping the contents of another packet on top of what remained of the first. I carved a shoelace line that streaked the length of the table.

My thoughts raced, pouring over every last detail of what she said and how she said it.

“I know I haven’t always been the best girlfriend. And I know I don’t even deserve to be called your girlfriend after this. But I love you with all my heart, Seth. I’ve always loved you. You know that I love you, right? Seth? Right ...?”

Hunched over the coffee table, I forced down the lump in my throat with several hard swallows. The cocaine changed me, sharpening my edges. Feeling certain of everything I needed to be certain about, I raised my head and stared steadily into her searching eyes.

“I never gave you his number,” I growled. “What?” Nikki asked, looking bewildered. In her mind my response was confoundingly tangential. “I never gave you my dealer’s number. I never wanted you to have it. I even tried to disguise it on my phone.”

“What on earth are you talking about? What does that have to do with *anything* I just said?” she shrieked.

“You claim that none of this was deliberate, that it was all just a string of innocent coincidences and mistakes. Yet the very first thing you did was entirely premeditated. I never gave you my drug dealer’s number, so at some point before your trip you went through my phone and stole it. Then you used it—behind my back—to buy all this,” I said, gesturing towards the staggering array of cocaine baggies.

“I was wrong! I admit that! But I’m telling you the truth, I didn’t ...”

“I’m not done yet,” I hissed, cutting her off. “You dated your pathetic ex-boyfriend long enough to know that Blondies is his favorite bar. We both know he still drinks there just about every night. So tell me, Nikki, how much of a coincidence was it when he walked through that door? Was it really unexpected? Were you really surprised?” Nikki pulled back. Her face turned flush and expressionless.

“You may have lost your tolerance for alcohol but when it comes to drinking everyone knows that cocaine is the great equalizer. Of all the nights we drank enough alcohol to put

ourselves into a coma not once have we ever blacked out when we had coke in our pocket. Not once. Yet this time you did? Why now? Why last night?”

“You don’t understand, Seth. I...” she stammered. “*Don’t...talk,*” I sneered, my voice rising. “You’ve said everything I needed to hear. By my count you’ve already struck out on three straight excuses.”

“Next, for some reason inside your twisted little mind you think telling me he wore a condom might do you some good, as if that somehow discounts the fact that you fucked him. We both know that he didn’t use a rubber and you’re sick for even trying to mention it. And don’t test me—if I put to words how I know that’s a twisted lie I think I might just vomit right here in front of you.”

“Finally, let’s flesh out exactly how this made you feel. *Filthy*, I believe was the word you used? You feel filthy? Well, let me tell you what I find filthy. Filthy is the fact that you woke up this morning, took a cab to the station, rode a train all the way across state lines, then started to unpack your fucking luggage before you even gave a passing thought to showering that so-called *filth* off of you, you fucking germ.”

My response cut deep. Nikki was in shock, like she was bleeding out.

I walked over to her dresser. Just as I now expected she hadn’t lost the necklace. It was hanging in her jewelry box. In a fit of guilt she must’ve taken it off, but not before her vile infidelity the night before—I had noticed it around her neck in the lone photograph of her at the bar.

I grabbed it and made my way back over to Nikki. Lording over her, I lowered the tip of my pointed index finger to within an inch of her forehead. The necklace dangled from my

middle knuckle like a noose. “Maybe to you this was just a necklace. But to me it was everything. My devotion to you, my willingness to sacrifice for you, my unconditional love for you. You have no idea how many nights and weekends I spent slaving away at the office working on a special project that won me the award that paid for this necklace. I could’ve spent that money on anything. I could’ve spent it on myself. Instead, I spent it on us. I spent it on *you*. Maybe I was trying to buy your happiness. Maybe I thought I could buy your love, too. And maybe that’s what love is to you—things, nice things, expensive things, all these *things* that I’ve been providing for you. All the while you never gave me anything in return but I never cared, because I had you and that’s all I ever wanted. That’s all I ever needed.”

“But I can see it now. The truth, or whatever you want to call it. You’ve been cheating on me all along. Only before it was with booze or coke or the lifestyle I afforded you. That’s where your heart has always been. You never really committed to this relationship. You never really opened yourself up to me. Even when you were naked you were still fully clothed. I thought we went to hell and back together but it turns out you never left. Well, look around. Hell is a lonely place, Nikki, and I can’t tell you how many times I felt lonelier sitting next to you than when we were apart. So to hell with you and to hell with this relationship,” I howled.

I gathered all the glassine baggies from the table and stuffed them into my pockets. Heading out the door I stopped to impart one last thought.

“I loved you to the marrow, Nikki. It was the first time I ever loved anyone like that. My only regret is that I wasted it on you.”

A block away from her apartment building I stopped to look over my shoulder. I thought I might see Nikki chasing after me, pleading in vain for me to reconsider. But she wasn't there. The sidewalk was empty. I was alone.

Back at my apartment I laid into the cocaine every time I felt tears welling up inside of me. I skipped lunch and about the time I should've been eating dinner I was already two grams deep.

At the top of every hour my phone vibrated and thrashed against my glass tabletop with an incoming call, jolting me to my feet. It was Nikki. I wasn't picking up and she wasn't leaving any voicemails. By midnight she had given up, so I just sat there in the dark getting more and more twisted.

The more I tried to excise thoughts of her from my mind the more I was tormented by them. I sunk deep into my couch cushions that had cradled us so many lazy Sunday afternoons, our tender arms and tired legs knotted into a soft pretzel. Pictures of us together lined my walls, every smile a poem. Glancing from one to the next my mind strung them together into a timeline of our relationship. I closed my eyes in anguish. Mental images of her wrapped in her ex's embrace flashed like still frames against the darkness. I opened my eyes again in horror.

I presumed it to be around four in the morning when I reached my breaking point. The coke had stopped numbing the pain hours ago. At that point I was just chasing the white rabbit, delaying the inevitable misery of coming down off a marathon bender. The thought of going to work in just a few hours didn't help. If I didn't stop thinking about Nikki and get some sleep I was going to flirt with the kind of madness that leaves permanent scars.

I entered my bedroom and stripped. Falling asleep was going to be hard. Conditions had to be just right. I need to be stark naked, face up on the bed, with a thin sheet lightly covering part of my body but not all. Most importantly, I needed to have a clear mind. Blank slate. No thoughts at all.

I climbed into bed and remained upright for a moment to silently beg for the mercy of sleep. Exhausted to the point of collapse, I fell backwards into position. The impact of my head hitting the pillow splashed a scent into the air. It slowly came to settle on my senses like a hanging fog. The scent was a combination of shampoo, moisturizer, and perfume that when blended together formed a distinct smell I instantly recognized. It was Nikki's scent, her essence, still clinging to my pillow from the countless times she had slept in my arms.

I doubled forward and dry-heaved between my legs. Pools of foul sweat gathered in the diamond creases of my mattress. I gave up trying to sleep. The next best thing I could do was shower, shave, and go to the office, keeping my streak of always being the first to arrive intact.

I dialed my shower's temperature nozzle to its maximum limit to scald myself clean. Somehow Nikki was able to regularly shower at that temperature. I knew this because whenever we showered together we playfully jostled the gauge back and forth, like a game. She would crank it all the way up and I would distract her with a kiss as I surreptitiously eased it back down.

Over at the sink I let the water run just as hot. In a minute I'd use it to shave, but for now I just wanted to bow my head into the rising steam and let it relieve my sinuses. *Breathe. It's over. She can't hurt you anymore.*

I slowly lifted my head to look at myself in the mirror. What I saw was devastating.

It wasn't my face, but rather a large and intricately drawn design on the mirror composed by a distinctly feminine hand. I had to step back from the counter to take it all in. There was no way of knowing how long it had been there or how many times I stood in front of that mirror without it ever being apparent to me.

Covering the entire border of the mirror were playfully etched hearts, drawn during a prior fog and left to hide until the mirror fogged over again. In the center of the mirror, perfectly framed by the extraordinary filigree of looping hearts, Nikki had written in bold letters her final twist of the knife: ***I Love You.***