

Drifting Away

When I asked Lolly how she was doing, I expected her to say, “fine.” That was always her answer: sometimes spoken in a high cheerful voice with batted lashes and a dimpled smile; other times spoken low and dull, with lips pursed, eyes blank, and shoulders shrugged. Always, “fine.”

This time, she said, “I need chemo.”

She sat in her hospital bed, in a light blue gown dotted with red, yellow, and green stars, the red Stanford Medical Center logo on a pocket over one of her small breasts. She tried to smile. Her lips were tight in the smile, but dimples still curled into her cheeks. I could see in the moist, flushed skin of her cheeks, beneath her cat’s eye-shaped glasses, that she had been crying, but was now trying to look strong for me.

I sat in a chair at her bedside. My shirt was untucked, tie pulled loose from my unbuttoned collar. I had pulled the tie away from my throat with two fingers as I drove down from the City, cursing rush hour traffic and the unending commercials that seemed to loop through every radio station and the boss who had given me another project that day when I’d barely started the two he’d assigned me the week before. I had expected her to say, “fine,” so I could bitch about my boss and the radio and the Giants, who had lost in Pittsburgh to make it five in a row, and all of the other shit that I complained about every day when I came home from work.

Instead, she said, “I need chemo.”

“What?”

“The results of my scan came back. Dr. Stiles says I need chemo.”

She hadn't even said hello. My ass had barely hit the stiff green cushion of the hospital chair and there it was: chemo.

I could feel the pulse of my heart at my temples. I sat forward, back bent in the poor posture of an office worker, palms pressed together as if in prayer, my thumbs under my chin and my fingers pressed to my lips. My eyes began to swell, but I held them open, gritting my teeth and refusing to blink free even one tear. There was no way I would cry in front of her, not now.

"Why?" I asked.

"It came back again. And now it's in my liver, and my bone marrow."

Her voice was low, choked with disappointment, but her face was firm, composed. She always took bad news and setbacks well. The last time, when she had told me what it was, that she was going to need radiation, chemo, she had actually smiled.

We'd met in college, dated since the camping trip at the end of freshman year when we washed down roasted marshmallows with boxed wine and ended up lying together, half-drunk, in a flimsy tent I'd bought for fifty bucks at K-Mart. The tent provided little protection from the chilly Santa Cruz Mountain air. We huddled close for warmth, breathing each other's breath, not even noticing the slightly sweet, slightly sour scent of the cheap wine on each other's lips. She wasn't the first girl I ever kissed, but I swear that was the first time it really felt *right*.

I was always aware of the doctor's appointments. Family history, she said. Precautionary, she said. It wasn't until the eve of our senior year, when we were moving the last of the furniture into the new apartment, our first place together, just a couple of blocks from Dolores Park, when she took my hand from the tarnished doorknob and guided it to the lump on her neck, that the truth came out. That she'd spent long stretches of her childhood in the pediatric ward. That she'd

beaten it, lived a normal life for years, excepting the frequent checkups. That she didn't want people to feel sorry for her, treat her different, so she never told people about it. Until it came back.

We shuffled into the living room, dropped onto the couch. Legs too weak to go another step. We'd gotten the furniture into the living room, but it was all scattered. The couch was set down at an odd angle, facing toward the corner. I stared into the corner, and she told her story, let out the truth with a little smile that said *I'm sorry I didn't tell you* and *It's gonna be all right*. I told her I could understand her not wanting to tell me, her not wanting me to look at her differently. I didn't tell her how angry I was. I didn't want to do anything to make it worse for her.

So I stayed. In my experience, most people will spend a lot of time telling you they've got your back, and then they'll bail at the first sign of trouble. I didn't want to be the guy who left Lolly. She was special. She always gave spare change or restaurant leftovers to homeless people. She did volunteer work with autistic kids. She wanted to be a crisis counselor after she graduated. A person like that, who cared so much about other people, deserved to have someone be there to care for her.

It wasn't easy, with the trips to Stanford, the tangles of blonde hair that started to pile up with the dust in the corners of our apartment. She was always tired. It seemed like I had to do everything for her. Cook. Clean. Shop. Drive her to appointments. Carry anything that weighed more than five pounds. I took a leave from school, got a job at a restaurant to cover bills. Sometimes I had my doubts. Was this what I wanted, to make my life all about somebody else? Sometimes I thought about the classes I could be taking, the women I could be dating, the fun I could be having, if I wasn't stuck taking care of Lolly. But it felt good to know that she needed

me. A lot of people drift through life, feeling like nothing matters, but I knew what I was doing did matter. And after it was over, after she beat it again, I was able to say I helped. We'd made it. And for almost five years, we got to be normal.

Until now.

"I thought it was gone for good," I said. It hurt to breathe.

She stared at me, her face wound taut as a guitar string.

"You've just been tired lately," I said to the scuffed leather of my shoes. I looked up at the dull fluorescent lights, then at her face. "This was just a routine checkup." That's what I told myself every time she wasn't feeling well. Every time she went to the doctor. And I was right, every time. Until now.

She gave me that tight smile again, scooted over in the bed and patted the sheets. "Come sit with me," she said.

I slipped off my shoes, stepping on them to keep my socks from touching the floor, and climbed onto the bed next to her. It was soft, for a hospital bed. She told me an attendant, a soft-voiced old Filipino man, had fluffed and adjusted it until it was just right for her. Nurses and attendants always liked her.

We hugged awkwardly, our torsos twisting while our legs stayed flat on the bed. I told her I would cut my hours, quit my job.

"Baby," she said, her chapped, peeling lips scratching against my neck, "don't do that."

"Oh, Lolly," I murmured into her hair. I kissed her on the top of her head and hugged her tighter.

A nurse came in, saying she needed to take vitals. Hospitals offer little chance for intimacy. I lowered myself from the bed to the chair. The nurse wheeled in a computer. She took a few measurements, asked Lolly how she was feeling, typed a few things into the computer.

As soon as the nurse left I got back in the bed. I stayed for hours, squeezed tight into the hospital bed, holding Lolly's head to my chest. I wanted to ask her what would happen. Why had it come back again? Was it going to be like last time? Was she going to ... no, I couldn't ask her that.

I didn't ask her anything. I only told her it would be OK. I don't know how many times I told her that, but every time she replied, "You don't know that." Not in a sad way, just matter-of-fact, and I would say, "Yes I do." I kept saying it would be OK, but I didn't believe it. Neither did she. I could tell. This time, there was no smile to say, *It's gonna be all right.*

Finally, she told me to go home. Get some rest. Years before, the first time, I wouldn't have listened. But I was tired. As I got out of bed to leave, I said, "At least you won't need to buy so many hats this time."

"Sure I will," she said. "Those old ones are out of style." I rolled my eyes, and she smiled, a little. I kissed her smile, brushing her chapped, scratchy lips with my own.

I walked down the hallway with my head down and passed through the sliding glass doors into a warm, early summer night. The nice weather pissed me off. It should have been cold, or raining, or something.

I felt heavy the whole way home, like there was something in my veins dragging me down. The feeling was the worst in my hands, the one on the steering wheel and the other that kept reaching out to pat the thigh that wasn't in the passenger seat. The miles of the wide, empty

freeway contracted and expanded so that the forty-minute drive seemed interminable. I turned on the radio, but turned it off when I heard John Lennon sing, *I'm in love with her and I feel fine*.

The car felt empty. Flashes of memory began to fill the void. The fine, fragile hair between my fingers and on the pillow next to mine. The rosy red cheeks that always made her look as if she had just come in from the cold. The way she fell asleep in an instant, her head on my shoulder, my chest, my lap. Maple syrup spread thickly over toasted waffles. The slow sway of her hips to Smokey Robinson, *I don't like you, but I love you, seems that I'm always thinking of you...* Her voice when I answered the phone, so high it cracked on the first syllable, "Baby!" Her name, Lolly, and the way the two syllables bounced like a tiny beach ball on my tongue. The way she hugged me, so tightly, yet always whispered in my ear, "tighter, tighter."

I didn't want to live without those things, but I couldn't keep living with the threat of losing them. I'd given so much of myself already, and where had it gotten us? It wasn't fair to ask for more, to keep asking and asking until there was nothing left, and then take her away anyway, like nothing we'd been through or done had mattered.

I exited the freeway. The off-ramp was dimly lit, strewn with newspapers and Styrofoam cups. Gusts of wind blew the trash under my tires. At the bottom of the ramp, a homeless man stood on the median. His face was dark, the skin pockmarked. "Help a brother out?" he said, leaning close enough to my open window that I could smell the booze on his breath.

"It's been a rough night," I said.

"Shit, you don't know nothing bout rough nights."

"We all got problems," I said. I remembered how Lolly always gave to homeless people, always. If she were here with me, I would have cleaned out my pockets, handed my loose change to this man. But she wasn't here, and I didn't have anything left to give.

There was no parking in front of our building. The nearest space I could find was six blocks away, in front of a rundown neighborhood bar. Six blocks seemed a long way to walk, and the last place I wanted to be was alone in our empty bed in our empty apartment. Last call wasn't for a while yet.

The bar was the sort of joint you'll find on a corner in any big city, a narrow Irish pub with scummy tile floors and cheap wood paneling, the sort of place that only gets frequented by neighborhood regulars. Even for a Monday night, it was quiet. There were only two other patrons, both aging hipsters, men in their thirties dressed in work pants and western-style snap-button shirts. I took a seat several stools down the bar from them.

"What's up, Joey," the bartender said.

"Not much, man." I liked the bartender at this place, but I was always forgetting his name.

"Where's your better half?" he asked with a smile. He'd never met Lolly. She'd only been to the bar once, and had refused to go back after one trip to the ladies' room. The bartender, Kevin, that was his name, had loved that story, and he asked me about my 'better half' every time I came in.

"She's in bed," I said. "Can I get a Maker's on the rocks?"

He brought me a tumbler filled generously with amber liquor and ice. I paid and took the change over to the jukebox in the corner. I took my time choosing my songs. For me, a good jukebox is the most important feature of any bar, and this place had one.

I took my seat just as the first sweet, melancholy chords of Wild Horses thrummed through the air. I always started with Wild Horses when I needed a soft song for thinking and drinking.

The ice in my drink had begun to melt, leaking traces of water that would cut the whiskey till it tasted just right. I took a peck at the tumbler, introducing the burn of the alcohol to my lips, and then I took a full drink, savoring first the cold of the ice in my mouth and then the heat of the whiskey in my throat.

I sat sipping my drink and listening to the music, my eyes drifting closed during Mick Taylor's solo and again for the lilting intro of Hendrix's Little Wing. I'd always thought that Jimi's guitar on that song sounded the way clouds look. I pictured Lolly drifting away on one of those clouds, and took a big gulp of my drink. Next came a Ray Charles tune. I sat bobbing my head to the horns, hearing the tears rain down amidst the voices of the Raylettes, waiting for the heavy drops to mix with my whiskey, waiting to drown.

I finished my drink. As I slid the empty glass away, I felt a rough hand on my shoulder.

"Joey?"

I looked up at my old buddy Chris. He had on his thick, ruddy face the big dumb grin that drunks get when they run into an acquaintance at a bar.

"What's up, man?" I said.

"Shit, you know. Just rolled in here. My people having us a night on the town."

"Isn't it Monday?"

"Hell yeah, motherfucker. Monday fun day. What you doing?"

"Chilling. Just having a drink before I hit the sack."

"Fuck all that. Come have some drinks with me." He peeked over his shoulder and then leaned in. "Got a couple fine ladies here." He nudged me with his elbow.

"I don't think so, man. I got work early. Besides, you know I got a lady."

“Shit, man, I ain’t asking you to do nothing. Just come have a drink with us. How long has it been since we kicked it?”

“All right,” I said, “but just one. I gotta get up early.” It didn’t really matter what time I got home, or what time I got up. I just didn’t want to be alone in that apartment.

“Fuck yeah.” Chris turned to the bartender, and ordered five shots of tequila and five beers.

“Tequila?”

“Don’t worry.” He slid a saltshaker over to me. “I got your training wheels. Now grab those beers.”

He gathered up the shots and carried them to a table next to the window. I stuck the saltshaker in my pocket and followed with the beers. Chris set the shots down and sat next to a lovely Mexican girl whose long, dark hair cascaded in kinks around her face and over her breasts. Chris put his freckled arm around her and grinned at me. He loved to show off his latest catch. Across the table from them sat a short, pudgy guy with a shaved head and a thin girl with shoulder-length blonde hair.

“Joey,” Chris said, “this is Sally and my boy Tommy. And this,” he turned to the Mexican girl, is “Rrrrrreina.” He kissed her on the cheek. She brushed him away, briefly feigning disdain before relenting with a kiss.

I pulled a chair up to the table and sat down. Chris held up his shot glass, and I salted the back of my hand. “Anyone else?” I asked. The girls extended their hands, and I sprinkled the salt. We took the shots and sipped the beers. The tequila was a poor chase for the whiskey, but the cold beer rinsed the rank taste from my mouth. Chris was whispering into Reina’s hair, and the other drinkers were quiet. It didn’t seem to be much of a night on the town.

“How do you know Chris?” I asked.

“Work,” Tommy said. The word came out slowly. His head nodded, mouth open, eyes dull.

“We work with him at Cha Cha Cha,” Sally said. Cha Cha Cha was a tapas place that was always crowded with bar-hoppers getting shitfaced on sangria. It was where I’d worked while I was taking care of Lolly, and where I had met Chris, who tended bar there. I’d started as a barback, and he’d treated me well, always tipping me out more than my share when he found out about Lolly. I quit when she got better and I could go back to finish school, but Chris still gave me dollar beers or leftover sangria when I stopped by, and we still went to a happy hour or a ballgame from time to time.

We passed a few rounds of drinks making small talk. Chris told a few funny stories of times we’d had a drink or two too many together. The details were always exaggerated, but I didn’t interrupt. Mostly, I just sat and stared out the window. At one point, a homeless person, hunchbacked under a ragged sweater, pushed a shopping cart past the pub. I wondered if Lolly would want me to go out there, give the guy some change, or maybe the rest of my beer. I knew she wouldn’t want me to be here with Chris. She thought I drank too much when I was around him, that he would get me in trouble. Maybe she was right. Chris wouldn’t push you to hook up with a girl, but he would allow everyone in the group to assume that everyone else was single. Usually, I volunteered my status, but tonight I felt thankful that Chris never said the word “girlfriend.” It wasn’t something I wanted to talk about.

I took a long drink and glanced across the table at Sally. She was scratching her wrist with a chipped fingernail. I thought about trying to start a conversation with her, but I didn’t know what to say. I took another drink.

After a while, I heard every bartender's favorite words: "Last call!" Chris lurched from his chair. "More drinks," he said, grabbing my arm and dragging me toward the bar.

"Are you sure you should give him anymore?" I asked, nodding toward Tommy as Chris ordered another round of shots and beers. Tommy's beer was still full, and his elbows planted heavily on the table were all that kept him from flopping face-first to the floor.

"Fuck it," Chris said. "He'll be fine."

We brought the drinks back to the table. Sure enough, Tommy took his shot. We downed the rest of the beer quickly, with Chris and I each taking one of Tommy's untouched bottles.

My legs quaked when I stood up to leave. The naked light bulb overhead spun. I wobbled out the door with the rest of the entourage. The neon sign in the window snapped off behind us. Chris lit a cigarette and turned to me.

"We're going to the girls' house," he said. "You coming with?"

"I shouldn't."

"Why the fuck not?" he said.

I thought of all the answers I could give. Gotta get up early. Work in the morning. Stanford after that. Lolly. None of them seemed like the right answer anymore.

"What you gotta get up for?" he pressed. "Work? Does it really matter if you show up late, or hungover? Or are you just scared your girl's gonna get pissed at you for staying out?"

"Man, you're like the fucking little red devil on my shoulder."

He ashed his cigarette and rubbed the reddish chinstrap beard that ran around his face from one ear to the other. He grinned. "Yeah, and I'm kicking the shit outta the angel."

"How far is it?"

He pointed down the street, toward Potrero. "Just a couple blocks."

I looked back toward Dolores Park, toward the empty apartment and the life in which it seemed like what I'd done had mattered. I couldn't make it matter anymore. She wasn't going to be around to look over my shoulder anymore. "All right," I said.

Chris led the way up the street, one arm wrapped around Reina's waist. Sally followed, with Tommy hanging all over her, and I brought up the rear. 'A couple blocks' turned out to be a fifteen-minute walk, but I wasn't surprised. Drunks always think that home is just around the corner.

The girls shared a one-bedroom apartment on the first floor of a blocky, indistinct little house. A cheap brown carpet covered the living room floor from one dingy, off-white wall to the next, and a large leather couch, probably passed down by someone's parents, was pushed into the far corner. One wall was decorated with a print of Dalí's melting clocks, the other with a blacklight poster of a marijuana leaf. The centerpiece on the coffee table was a three-foot bong.

Sally went into the bedroom, and Tommy staggered toward the bathroom. We heard him collapse on the floor and begin to retch.

"Where did you find that guy?" I asked Chris.

"Tommy ain't so bad," Chris said as he went into the kitchen. "He just ain't used to partying with me." He pulled a bottle of margarita mix from the refrigerator.

I sat on the couch next to Reina, who was fiddling with a Ziploc bag full of weed. The crackle of a blender chopping ice came from the kitchen, and Chris came in with two plastic cups frothing up over their lips.

"Do you want to take some bong rips?" Reina asked me.

"Nah," Chris said before I could reply. "I'm gonna roll a blunt after I finish mixing these drinks."

Chris brought in two more cups and sat on the couch. He sliced open a Swisher Sweet cigar with a razor blade and dumped the tobacco out. I watched him crumble bits of Reina's weed into the cigar wrapper and took a sip of my drink. It tasted like tequila with a foam skin.

Sally came out of the bedroom and knelt down on the floor next to the table. She had taken off her coat and sweater, and her simple, spaghetti-strapped black dress revealed pale shoulders and arms that were heavily tattooed.

Chris finished rolling the blunt, drying the edges of the wrapper with a cigarette lighter, and passed it to Reina. She looked elegant when she lit it, like Lauren Bacall lighting a cigarette. She took a huge pull on the blunt, exhaled a plume of smoke, and passed it to me. I hesitated, holding it between my thumb and forefinger—Lolly hated people smoking, any kind of smoking, and would give me shit if she were here. I took a big hit and coughed, hacking the smoke out of my mouth and nose.

Chris laughed. "I guess you ain't been partying with me neither, Joey."

The blunt went around and around. Chris and the two girls chatted as they smoked, but I sat silent. I could feel a bit of a tingly body high, but mostly I just felt drunker.

Silence settled over us when the blunt was gone. I sipped my margarita and stared at the ceiling. It was stained and sagging in the corner from water damage.

Chris and Reina were whispering. I couldn't hear their words over the buzz in my ears. They began kissing. A minute later they got up and went into the bedroom.

The door shut. The only sound now was the low *zzzzz* in my ears. I looked into my glass and swirled my drink, watching the chunky foam swish around the edge. After a minute, Sally got up and went to the stereo, a boombox that had been the top-of-the-line model when I was in

high school. She put in a CD, and sat down on the couch, her accompaniment the familiar first chord of Wild Horses.

“Oh man.” I sunk down into the couch.

“What?” she asked.

“This is my favorite song.”

“Really? Mine too.”

“Shut up.”

“No, seriously. I grew up on the Stones. My dad was one of the Hell’s Angels at Altamont.”

“No fucking way.”

“Yeah, check this out.” She leaned in close to me and pointed at a tattoo on her shoulder, a grinning death’s head donning a winged helmet and floating above the words *Hells Angels*.

“No shit.” I took a sip of my drink, and stifled a little laugh.

“What?”

“Nothing. I was just thinking I wouldn’t expect Wild Horses to be a biker chick’s favorite song.”

She took a long sip of her drink and sunk low into the couch. “My dad loved riding more than anything else. He’d leave me and Mom for weeks, months at a time. And then every time he came back, he’d say he was back for good, but pretty soon he’d leave again. Every time he left, I’d beg him to stay, and he’d say, ‘Sally, wild horses couldn’t drag me away from you.’” She shook her head. “It sounds stupid now, but I always believed him, and I still like to pretend that these giant horses, like fucking Clydesdales, are dragging him away, but he’s still fighting, pulling them back home to be with me.”

She drank again. “Fuck, that sounds stupid,” she said.

“No, it’s not,” I said. “It’s hard to lose someone.”

I swallowed the rest of my drink. We sat silent, letting the music push it away, put it somewhere we wouldn’t have to touch it or feel it.

“Why’s it yours?” she said.

“What?”

“The song. Why’s it your favorite?”

“Oh.” I was still looking up at the ceiling. The walls were spinning around me, the ringing notes of the lead guitar piercing my mind and my body. “I think it reminds me of everything I’ve ever loved and lost, and everything I’m going to love and lose in the future. Like, there’s that line about not letting her slide through your hands, but then at the same time he talks about how she just makes him suffer. And then in the end, when he says ‘we’ll ride them someday,’ you feel like maybe someday you can take control, make things better, but you know Mick knows that’s just a lie, cause really we can’t fix anything or trust anything or have faith in anything cause it’s all fucked up, and in the end nothing we do matters, so we might as well just throw it all away, cause who fucking cares, cause we’re all just gonna die anyway.”

I looked over at Sally. She was leaning over the coffee table, digging through a small shaving kit. When she turned around, I saw she was holding a cigarette lighter and a spoon.

“Want a shot?” she said.

“Sure,” I said. Why not?

I heard the click of the lighter and smelled the burn. A moment later she held a small syringe out to me.

“Do it for me,” I said.

She moved close to me on the couch. “Is this your first time?” she whispered.

I gave a tiny nod.

“Don’t worry,” she said. “I’ll be gentle.” She kissed me on the cheek and rolled up the sleeve of my shirt. She tied a silky black scarf around my upper arm, tight. I closed my eyes, let my head drift back. Her fingers danced lightly down from the scarf. I felt a tap, and then a pinch. She pulled the scarf loose and kissed me once on the lips. She moved away, but the heat from her kiss stayed, rising until it flashed like a fire cresting higher and deeper until it was the only thing in the world. Nothing hurt anymore. Nothing was anything anymore. When I opened my eyes, there was a girl next to me on the couch. It was Lolly. It had to be. I wanted to reach out for her. Touch her. Hold her. But I was so tired. My eyes drifted closed. I drifted away.