

RICK'S NIGHT OUT

You'll never find your soulmate.

I have had a couple of girl friends, in the friend girl sense, that would always say things like that when they had a few drinks.

"You'll never find your soulmate, if..."

"You'll never find your soulmate, when..."

They stopped a couple of years ago.

At this point, I've lost that qualifier. At this point, perhaps the correct thing to say is: you'll never find your soulmate.

I suppose I'm okay with that. I am, after all, not one to settle.

I am a College dropout that would not settle for some terrible job, trapped between having and not. I am a failed writer that would not settle for obscurity or blogging. Most of

all though, I am a failed lover. Not in the sense that immediately comes to mind, but in the sense that I fail to love.

I have always chosen my own image of what my soulmate should be, rather than trying to love something about the person I find. I cannot compromise with love.

I am a sixty year old man in the body of a twenty-something. Intransigent and lonely.

Yet, here I am again. A fool on an open stool, a drink in my hand that I don't care for, and a heart full of hope.

One of these days, she'll come strolling into my little backwater town in the middle of nowhere. My girl will swing that bleak wooden door open slowly, peek her head inside to make sure its not too busy, and move a few graceful steps to take an open seat at the bar.

She's not gorgeous or stunning or any of the other normal words used to describe beauty, but she glows, as if faintly luminescent. Her voice is light but firm. Her manner, demure, but not timid. She is, in a word: inviting.

She is also not here. Nor have I ever seen her anywhere but my dreams. However, like the lottery, I can't win if I don't play. I just wish adults had a place to play in this town, a place she actually might be. All we have is the local bar.

It's a dump like any you'd find in small town America, I suspect. Poorly lit to enhance the beer goggle effect, dirty tables and matching chairs, a digital jukebox that sits in the

smoke stained silhouette of the former Wurlitzer, and an old scarred pool table.

The final piece, of course, is a long cigarette burned bar, carved into by various local drunks over the decades the place has been open. Their own version of "Brooks was here."

I am not one of those drunks, but I sympathize. Another ten years of life beating me down, who knows, I might just sidle up to the bar for good, and leave my own mark on the hanging board.

Miller, the ancient barkeep, turns up the terrible rock song playing as the soundtrack of my frustrating evening. It's one from the early 80's. I don't know who decided that when a song becomes old, it becomes classic, but I would like to punch him in the face. I'm sure it was a man.

I watch a couple of younger guys shooting pool and try to choke down the incredibly strong mixer Miller poured for me. Not sure if he thinks it a compliment to completely screw up my drink, but I tip nonetheless. I'd rather get some extra liquor in my drink than spit.

*Boom.*

Bitter wind gusts through the bar in a sudden rush as the door slams open behind me. The cold reaches inside my collar and down my spine like icy fingers. I turn in a flash of annoyance and liquid courage, and feel it drain out of me faster than a held back piss.

The door swings closed behind a young woman standing just

inside its threshold, bundled up for the wind. She is tall, and stands with an air of grace and nervous energy. She shines in a faint white light, as subtle as it is real.

I have to force myself to look away when she glances my direction.

My hands suddenly seem clumsy and awkward. I can feel every flaw in my body explode into bright and shining clarity in front of my soulmate. The woman that has just walked out of my dreams and into my bar.

I run my fingers through the three day old stubble on my chin, wondering how I can possibly believe that she is the one. Yet something inside me is so sure its disturbing.

She sits at a stool near the door, easier to escape if she's overwhelmed, I suppose, but its also only a few empty stools away.

I decide to be an observer for now, let her order a drink, settle, and give my stomach a chance to untie itself.

I try to hear what she orders over the bad guitar solo screaming through the crackling bar speakers, but all I can catch is a fragment of her voice. Its soft, yet the tones are firm. She sounds like she is used to giving orders. She is used to being listened to.

I like to listen.

I watch Miller take his time pouring her drink as he looks her over. My soulmate doesn't seem to notice as she slides her

fingers along the various tattoos in the wood, dismissing the man with a slight gesture as he finishes.

She sips the tumbler of dark liquor and scans the bar. I surreptitiously examine her movements through the mirror above the bottles. Her bright, intelligent blue eyes look everyone over, until they finally land on me.

I look away as our eyes meet in the mirror, but I notice her glance linger a moment before moving back to the bar. My soulmate might like what she sees, but then again, she might not. Either way, I'm going to need to convince her.

This is the part of new encounters I hate. The vulnerability is literally nauseating. If it were a drug deal, this would be the moment when I hold out my money, waiting to see if I'll receive a baggy, or hand cuffs.

"I'm Rick," I say.

One of the local bar flies has decided to destroy Fleetwood Mac by trying to sing along. My soulmate doesn't hear me. I move one stool closer. This time I yell. Not an angry yell, just an attention getting yell.

"I'm Rick,"

It just happens to coincide with the end of the song. She hears me this time, along with everyone else in the bar.

"Who cares?" One of the drunks says. He gets a couple laughs.

I really could care less though, because her eyes are on me

now, in full examination mode. They are blue. Vivid blue.  
Burning blue.

How can they possibly be that blue?

"I'm Lily," she says, turning back to her drink.

I laugh before I can stop myself. She tilts her head in a questioning gaze. I have to remind myself not to stare at the delicate lines of her face.

"I'm sorry to laugh, Lily. Its a nice name. I just didn't expect a girl like you to have such an average name. You don't seem like an average girl," it sounds like a pick up line, but I mean every word.

I realize that I'm calling her a girl, rather than woman or lady. I can't help it. She looks somehow new in the world, like everything is a bit awing and jarring at the same time. As if she is still getting used to her environment.

She looks surprised, and possibly a bit suspicious at my comment. As if I have just stumbled onto something secret. She casts a couple quick glances at Miller, and an older man who was close to the door when she came in. The only other people that had been close to her.

"I, I didn't mean anything bad by it," I say, moving one stool closer.

I try to look apologetic and comforting, but probably end up with condescending. She narrows those bright blue eyes. Piercing into me. I begin to stammer a bit before laughing again

and settling on what I hope is a sheepish grin.

She is very good. I suddenly feel like a nine year old in the Principal's office.

"What did you mean then?" she asks.

"Just that... its not everyday we get a newcomer to town," Its a weak statement at best, but I hope it's a start.

"Especially not in the middle of the night," I say.

She continues to stare at me.

"This place is a long way from anywhere," I hope she will hear the hidden question.

"That's exactly why I'm here," She says, gesturing her head around the bar.

"I like quiet places."

A horrible, cliché line forms in my head around the last two words.

Quiet place...

The alcohol urges me to say it. I nearly do. Nearly.

Another song starts on the jukebox. *Lola*, by The Kinks. I check my urge to glance down at Lily's tight jeans. I don't have a reason to question my soulmate, not in that way. I nearly laugh at the thought, before she turns back to me.

"Rick, why are you here?" She asks.

My humor falters. I feel my eyes go wide before I can stop them. It is a very blunt question for this type of establishment.

This place was built and maintained to forget existential questions, not face them point blank. She is very good indeed. I take a deep breath and finish my horrible drink.

"I am here to meet my soulmate," I say.

It could be the most ridiculous phrase I have allowed myself to utter. It sounds foolish, cliché, and grossly romantic. Yet, I look her full in the face, I don't blink.

I can play too.

Her face changes as she considers my answer. I can see that she is actually thinking about it, the lights in her eyes flashing. She smiles. The light in the room seems to dim around her once more.

"Rick, seems a strangely ordinary name for you," She says with an upraised eyebrow.

I am smiling like an idiot, like a kid on Christmas morning. Like a man without a care, and I don't.

"Can I buy you a drink?" I ask, tapping my finger against her empty glass.

She pokes her bottom lip out in a slight pout.

"I better not. I have to drive," She says.

I hesitate for a moment, but the alcohol is working through me now, and the filter in my head seems to be more porous than usual. I lean closer to her trying to balance on the side of friendly, without being possessive.

"I could give you a ride, I know the area pretty well. Been



driving these roads most of my life." I say.

She tilts her again, as if trying to gauge me. Those blue eyes burning into me the whole time.

"It's pretty far out of town," She says.

I can hear the question, I shrug.

"I'm staying with some friends. They aren't from around here either," She says.

"Should we bring some beers for them?" I ask, smiling.

I'm not going to let her get away that easily.

She furrows her brow at the suggestion, as if it is the most ridiculous thing I could have said, then she sighs.

"Well, I suppose I could get a ride back with my friends in the morning," she says.

"Miller!" I shout before she can change her mind.

"Another round."

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The early morning air is frigid, even for this time of year. It doesn't seem to touch Lily though. She's even more radiant in the orange glow of the parking lot lights.

A cold breeze ruffles her dark hair as we walk together, so that it falls into her eyes. Her gesture to brush it aside is grace itself.

The quiet looming over town is almost unsettling. Perhaps would be for a person from the outside world. Lily inhales the silence like life itself.

"I wish I could stay here," She says, stopping and tilting her head upwards.

"I have never been in a place so peaceful."

"One more isn't going to ruin the peace," I say.

She looks at me again. That piercing blue eyed gaze, and something else. Water rimming them like glacial runoff.

I begin to stammer an apology that she waves off.

"It's not you, Rick. I can't blame you for being ignorant. I just don't want to talk about it."

The silence is long and tense as I battle with the frustration and hurt growing inside. She doesn't know. She doesn't know my buttons. How could she know I've spent my whole life trying to help, only to be rebuffed.

I take a deep breath and pull out my keys.

"How about that ride then?" I ask. The calm in my voice surprises me.

She looks at me for a second like she doesn't recognize me. I can tell she's lost in thought. The creases in her forehead and her slightly pouted lips are all the sign I need. Finally, she sighs, shrugs and takes my arm.

"Lead the way," She says, looking up at me with those intense blue eyes. Even in the dark they seem to shine.

My truck looks like a jalopy. Rust is starting to show around the wheel wells. The blue paint is faded and scratched, and the front bumper hangs lower on the passenger side. That's

only on the outside.

She settles into the cold bucket seat next to me. We are both shivering a bit now, frost has started to fill the windshield. The truck starts on the first try though, the high-flo exhaust rumbling to life beneath us. I turn the radio on to fill the silence as I let the truck warm up. The heater kicks on in about a minute. I take good care of my truck.

The station is local, mostly town gossip and events, filled in by the few musicians we have. They called themselves musicians anyway. I doubt Beethoven or Bach, or even Ringo Starr would agree with them. Luckily, our conspiracy theorist is on instead.

"Four nights in a row now, we have had reports of mysterious lights hovering around our town," He is saying.

"This guy's usually good for a laugh or two," I say, turning toward Lily and motioning toward the radio.

Instead of the eye roll I was expecting, she is lost in thought again, looking at the radio, as though actually listening to the coot as he babbles.

"Last night was the closest encounter yet," He says. "Sources of our show have given information that a single craft was spotted landing in the forest west of town. Is this the beginning of an invasion? Are government officials meeting with alien representatives as I speak? Folks, I can't tell you with certainty, but I can say that someone needs to be asking these

questions."

"Aliens? Really, Phil? Come on, man, move on to something plausible," I say, reaching down to switch to a CD.

Lily shakes her head a bit, laughing nervously.

"I thought he sounded pretty serious," She says, raising an eyebrow.

My turn to laugh, and her amused smile grows into a grin.

"That he did," I say through my chortling, "That he did. So where are we headed?"

She sighs, and it turns into a yawn.

"West of town, my friends and I are staying out there. Take the dirt road next to the gas station."

"I know the one," I say through a yawn of my own.

Yawns have to be contagious.

The truck is a warm cozy island in the cold winter wind that picks up as we leave town. I can see the snow blowing across the icy dirt road, leaving smudges and streaks in complex flowing shapes.

My mind races in the silence trying to think of something to break the tension. I have never learned how to start conversations.

"So, do you guys have a cabin out here or something? I haven't heard about them putting any new houses in up here," I say. It sounds lame.

"Something like that," She says, continuing to look out the

window.

"Well if you told me," I say, "Maybe I could help you spot it. Hell, I might even know the place."

I try a comforting smile, but she continues to look out the window. She is not giving me anything. My frustration comes back. I want to grab her and turn her around, and shout something.

My irritation distills into sadness as I look at her. None of that would do any good. A desperate thought of a desperate man, watching the chance of a lifetime slip away.

"I'm sorry about before," I say, "If I upset you, I really did not mean to."

She stays silent, but she turns back to face me now. Her stare is like the cliché lightbulb in the face interrogation tactic. She doesn't even have to ask a question and I want to spill my guts.

"I meant what I said at the bar," I begin, "I know it sounds silly or crazy, I guess I'll tell how it started."

Ten minutes later I have told her my life story, and we pass the road to the last cabin that I have ever seen on this road.

Beyond this point is a hundred miles of wintry forest. I slow the truck down.

"Wow, I'm sorry I have been talking so much," I say, giving a quick laugh. "I didn't miss it did I?"

She looks at me, and I can tell in her smile that she is struggling with something. I stop the truck, and turn to her.

She bites her bottom lip and avoids my eyes, but I still see that she is trying to decide on something.

I look back in my memory at the last ten minutes of story and wonder what I said that made her so upset. Any number of things really. Finally, she meets my gaze.

"I suppose I might as well tell you," She says.

Something is different. The moon peeks out from behind gray winter clouds. It fills the darkened cab with streams of light. Lily's eyes are shining. Literally shining with reflective light, like a cat's. I feel my jaw drop as the truck begins to sputter and finally dies.

I reach for the key, but she places her hand on mine. I almost pull away.

"It won't start, Rick. I have made sure of that," She says. Her voice is calm and warm.

I blink at her for a few seconds, not comprehending what she is telling me.

"But, I... Wait, you? How did you...?" She places a finger on my mouth.

"Listen, Rick, you need to listen now. I know you like to listen." She takes a deep breath.

I don't remember saying that.

"My name isn't Lily, and I'm not human," She says.

I can feel my jaw moving a bit, trying to form words to combat the utter nonsense of her claim

Then the moon moves back behind the clouds, and the radiance around her fills the cab of my now darkened pickup.

"I like you, Rick. I don't know why exactly. But, I know I don't want my friends to hurt you. Not like they did to the others," she says in that same matter of fact tone.

"The others?"

Thoughts spin through my mind. Fragments of memories. Disappearances. Mutilations. Charred bones. The old crazy on the radio, babbling. About things that really happened.

I feel my pulse begin to race. I notice that my breathing is fast and shallow, like a cornered animal, or a dying one.

"Don't think like that, Rick," she says, gripping my hand in hers.

Her flesh is warm and soft, and her grip is tender. I swallow. My mouth has gone dry. Its hard to breathe.

"You can read my thoughts?"

The concerned look on her face deepens, softens. A mother realizing her child is afraid.

"Its not like that," she says. "Not really. It's more like I can tell what you are feeling."

She tilts her head to the side again as she looks at me. I can see amusement returning to her features, and something else.

"I'm glad you are listening now, Rick. I know it's hard for

you. You are on the cusp of consciousness, trapped in a battle of thought and emotion. You struggle everyday to confront the world without becoming a slave to it. It's the reason I love... humanity."

Her gaze turns back to the window. A single light shines in the distance.

"I've decided that's the reason I like you, Rick. Why I'm going to save you."

The light is getting closer now. Brighter.

"I can't come with you, can I?"

I cannot believe I'm asking the question to this stranger, this alien being. Yet she is the being that knows me the best, and she accepts me. She is my soulmate.

"No," she says, "and I'm sorry for that." She sounds like she means it.

The sinking feeling in my chest is deep, like cold seeping into a poorly insulated room. I try to swallow again. I wish I had something to drink.

"They will be here in a moment," she says, pulling her hand from mine, still staring out the window at the approaching light.

"It'll be best if I get out now. Thank you for the ride, Rick, and for reminding me why I came to study your species in the first place. It reminds me we still have a lot to learn."

I want to tell her everything. I want her to know that I



know her too, that I have been dreaming about her my whole life.

The door slams shut before I can respond. She is walking in her shimmering aura, down the road, out of my life. I want to get out. I want to yell at her to come back. I want to run into the light with her. I don't move a muscle.

Instead, I stare as the light sweeps across the lonely mountain clearing, no longer a single light now but a series of them in strange geometric shape.

It settles above her, noiseless in its movements. She turns back now, the first time I've seen her face since she left the truck. Her eyes shine, but not just in their strange reflective light. She really does care.

The light intensifies for a moment and she is gone. The craft hesitates, then moves into position above the truck. Instinctively, I go for the keys. Nothing.

The light is blinding now, I can't tell if its pulling me up, or moving down toward me.

I thought she cared. I really thought she cared.

#

The light is horrible, blinding.

The light is the sun, piercing through the curtains of my bedroom window. It always does this time of year. That's why I bought the curtains in the first place. A lot of good it has done.

My head spins as I try to sit up. Either I'm still drunk,

or I'm in the early stages of a very bad day.

I'm hoping for drunk.

I slowly pull myself into a sitting position with my head in my hands. My skull feels like its about to split, and my tongue is like sandpaper.

"I need something to drink," I say to the emptiness of my apartment.

The thought jars a memory. A dream maybe. A pretty girl, shining, in my truck of all places. A very dry mouth.

Another night with nothing but dreams to keep me company.

I'm never going to find my soulmate.