

A Man Alone

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I

Bugaboo

lauren, nicole, megan, christine, molly,
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* * *

I hung up the phone with the most reservation and the most relief simultaneously. I should never have called her. I know better. Well, apparently I don't. Change is hard. They say the first step is admitting the problem, but that's if you have a chemical dependency. Girls—women, I should say—are many things, but they are not drugs. They only make you do drugs.

You do grow dependent on them. You'd steal for them, kill for them, embarrass yourself for them. You'd even cut your hair and wear silly clothing for them. By you I mean me.

Yes. Then they screw you over and you find yourself still following them around like a dog. No matter how much time has passed, no matter how mad you get, no matter how many of your friends she slept with, no matter how long she has been with the same guy you can never say what you most desire: stay away from me.

You can't work it into any conversation; you can't begin or end with it.

Still you follow her and you blame her.

You follow her, yet you blame her.

* * *

I can't stand hanging out at bars anymore. It was fun for a while until I realized what was happening. I would go there every Friday and Saturday with the same two friends of mine. We would grab stools and drinks.

Whenever a half-decent looking girl—woman, preferably a slut—would walk by, we'd all look and comment and say, "Wooo." We'd get them drinks and get ass in return.

I began to develop a perfect bar slouch: elbows on the bar, back hunched just so. I'd look at myself in the mirror and wouldn't believe the reflection was really me. My descent occurred so gradually, didn't it?

Smoke would rise from the cigarettes at either side of me. I pictured myself in hell. My sin being despair.

I eventually stopped looking at the girls—woman who walked by. Well, not every woman. It's hard to change. I began to drink less, stay for fewer hours. I'd dismiss myself to unhappy friends who threw popcorn or peanut shells at my back.

I began watching the way it all worked: the girls—excuse me, women—who went from guy to guy getting free drinks, the guys who bought the drinks.

The most pathetic sights.

There were always the two girls who were made up to look pretty that came in with their fat friend. They wanted to be left alone. The fat friend always wondered why they never got hit on. Abuse comes in all forms.

There were the guys in pairs, threes, or fours who came in with collared shirts tucked into their khakis, decked out looking better than they did for a job interview. They were just searching for some trim. And they got it for the price of a few shots or mixed drinks—often less than a few.

There were the women, little more than girls, that worked the bars for...what? Drinks, affection with no strings attached, a father figure who'd leave, too?

People go to bars to meet people. There's no other way to explain it. Why else would you pay so much—two, three, four times—more than what a drink is actually worth? Where else are you going to meet someone? If you didn't find your spouse in high school or college, you're going to find them at work or at a bar. People don't meet people on the street or in the park, okay?

I was out of school and working with a bunch of guys. Bars, man. That was all I had. I tried it for a while.

Then I wondered if I really wanted some woman I met in a bar. The answer became no, of course not. What am I, stupid? You're drunk and you hook up with some drunk bitch in a bar, take her home if you dare (or maybe just to your car), do your thing, kick her out, and never want to see her again. If you ever do run into her, chances are that neither of you will remember each other. And if you do, you pretend like you don't. The guy doesn't want her to be needy and the girl doesn't want to admit she got screwed twice. I've been there; I know.

Sad, sad, sad.

The strange part is you don't necessarily have to use a pick-up line. I once got some play without saying a word. I slid her a drink and the rest is...unimportant.

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One night I was slouched at the bar betwixt two friends who really should have sat next to each other as I was able to kill most every conversation with five words. Instead of moving they just talked louder.

"Guess who I ran into the other day," Tom piped loudly.

"Who?" Justin asked in my ear.

"An ex-girlfriend of mine, Lily. I don't think you ever met her."

"No, I didn't." Justin smiled a drunken smile and said, "No, I did not," just to hear it again.

Tom poked me. "You ever met Lily, Scott?"

"Yeah, you introduced us once, and I saw her about a year ago."

"No shit. You never told me that. Where did ya see her?"

"At a movie theater."

"Did you talk?"

I looked at him trying to decide what his mood was. "Sure."

What'd-ya-talk-about was coming next, I was positive.

"What'd ya talk about?"

"Nothing much. We only spoke for a few minutes before the movie. Just pleasantries. So you saw her?" Pleasantries...

"Oh, yeah." Tom drank most of his beer. "She looked good as hell, too. I don't know why I broke up with her. Well, I know why, but it was probably a mistake."

"What's she up to," I asked.

"Not sure. She didn't seem too into talking to me. She acted weird so I cut it short and took off. It's a thing of mine: I can't be friends with any of my ex-girlfriends the way you are, Scott."

* * *

"I want to break up with Jerry."

I yawned away from the phone receiver. "Okay."

"I'm just so sick and tired of doing all the work in our relationship, you know?"

No. "Yeah." I called why?

"Lately, I only see him after work which is after midnight. And most of the time I only talk to him on the phone. So what I have to do is wait around by the phone in case he calls which never lets me do anything with friends, you know?"

What? "That sucks." I don't care.

"You and me never hang out anymore. We should do something soon."

What? How can I get out of this quick? "Oh?" NO!

"Sure. We should go see a movie."

Shitshitshit. "That would be nice." Goddammit!

* * *

"You can't even be friends with the girls you date while you date them, Tom,"

Justin said from around me.

"What're ya talkin' about?"

"Gina. . . . Gina."

"Gina what?"

"Man, you never liked her. You did it all for the nookie."

I piped up: "C'mon!"

"The nookie."

"C'mon."

"Shut up," Tom spit. "I resent that."

I looked at him with his cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, its smoke gently burning my eyes. "You resent that, huh? Well, how do you think she felt having sex with some guy that never took the time to find out anything about her? How do you think she felt with your weight on top of her and the carpet in your living room causing burns on her back? Do you think she resented you treating her like a whore? I'll bet she did."

Justin was utterly speechless. Tom slowly took the cigarette from his lips and pointed it at me—the burning ember close to my face. I breathed the smoke deeply and held it in. "What is your problem?" he asked me with a tight face and angry, drooping eyes. "You know, the past few weeks I've been getting the general impression that you're not having much fun when we go out."

"Well, why don't you ask me what's the matter?" Faint smoke drifted from my mouth.

Tom leaned in close and put the hand with the cigarette on my shoulder.

"What's the problem, buddy?"

I leaned in closer to him so our noses practically touched. "Why didn't you ever talk to Gina?"

"What?"

"Don't make me ask you again."

Tom pulled back some, but I grabbed his hand and his cigarette fell to the floor. I pulled him close again. "Tell me," I insisted.

"She never wanted to talk to me either."

"She was shy."

"Yeah, and she never wanted to talk to me."

"So, instead of ever speaking all you did was have sex. You did her on your carpet, on the couch, in front of the window. You covered her mouth so she wouldn't make too much noise. You were never interested in talking to her. It was a big joke to say you did it all for the nookie, but fact is that it's true. You fucked her until you got tired of it, and you'll be doing it again as soon as you get the chance."

"Me? How many times have you taken a girl out of here or a place just like it and done your thing with her and told me about it the next day? Do you even remember their names?"

I thought of how sick he made me.

"You think you're better than me, hey?"

"I know I am."

Tom looked to the floor. "You made me drop my cigarette."

I turned to Justin who was trying to hear all we said. "Justin, give the man another cigarette. He has his priorities all straightened out." I stood.

"Where are you going?" Tom asked, not wanting me to leave before he got the chance to say the most spiteful things he could manage.

"I'm going to the bathroom. Wanna shake it for me, big boy?" He waved me away and I walked unsteadily to the back of the bar, nearly stumbling into the pool table and some people I may have recognized. The smoke from the cigarette still burned and inhaling that little bit made me slightly queasy. I shut and locked the door. The music was thankfully muffled. I aimed at the center of the bowl and emptied my bladder in a minute. I flushed and splashed water on my face; I ran my fingers through my hair and felt the coolness on my scalp. In the mirror I saw my eyes were red and my skin was pale, my lips sickeningly red. Two of me appeared and the world spun and swayed. I braced myself on the sink and felt the beers I drank churn and rise. I washed it all down the sink and rinsed my mouth out with tap water and splashed more on my face. I felt better, less hot, more steady. I was able to walk out of the bathroom, past the line of three men waiting, and sit back on my stool.

Tom and Justin sipped at beers, not speaking or looking at anything in particular. I sat back down and motioned for the bartender and asked for ice water. She brought it to me and I gave her a dollar. I sipped it.

I saw Tom watching my reflection in the mirror and he noticed me looking at him.

"What's happened?"

I smiled at his reflection and looked to Justin's. "What's happened, Justin? Do you know?"

I pulled back from the situation and saw the three of us looking at not only each others' reflections, but our own. Our eyes would go from person to person to ourselves. I found it funny inside myself, but I dared not laugh and stir up my stomach.

Justin didn't answer and I found myself mostly looking at his image. I realized that I didn't know how we first met. He wasn't a childhood friend like Tom.

Was it two years ago? For the life of me I couldn't think of it.

I looked back at Tom's copy. Even in the dim light I could see how much paler I was than him. He didn't notice; he didn't think to notice; he didn't care to notice. I tried to put into words what I was feeling, but I couldn't. I chewed ice fiercely and hurt my teeth, my gums, but I kept on doing it. I asked for more ice water and more. Four glasses I sipped and chewed. Each time I gave the bartender a dollar—the water much better than any beer or shot.

Tom and Justin continued to drink beer. Tom smoked cigarette after cigarette and filled the ash tray with butts and ash. None of us said a word more. It wasn't uncomfortable like a lull in a phone conversation.

Tom asked an unanswerable question and killed the night.

I chewed the last piece of ice and went back into the bathroom. Some color had returned to my face. I bared my teeth in the mirror and blew fog on to the glass. I drew eyes and a mouth with my finger into the condensation. I paced the short length of the bathroom a couple times getting my hate up more with each about-face—I caught sight of my own eyes in the mirror: "I remember their fucking names"—and punched the wall, opening a knuckle. I hit the same spot again and again. Four times I punched the wall tearing my knuckle worse each time and leaving a dirty, bloody smudge on the wall.

Blood welled up as I clenched my fist and I relished the pain. I let a drop fall into the sink and run down the porcelain to the stainless steel drain. I licked the wound and enjoyed its saltiness.

I left the blood trail in the sink and walked out.