

Everything is Not Okay,

Everything is Better.

A memoir

By: Reese Hawkins

Zero

Honestly? At first, I was shocked at how easy it was. How far I didn't have to go in order to just... *be* somewhere and some*one* else. Where no one knew me, and I was new again.

No stifling conversation, no backstory, no latent underpinnings of mild small talk and subtext-ridden commentary. I'm sure you can relate. I am from a small town of less than 20,000 so I was used to everybody knowing everyone and everyone knowing everybody's business—my own included. A sleepy little town with an idle mind and its hands locked in a Chinese finger trap. A coalescence of mediocrity and resigned ideals; all of which made my crumbling marriage and soon-to-be divorce all the less palatable to a mid-twenties mindset soaked in vices and balancing on the edge of overload and calamity.

You see, I knew she was leaving. It was written on her many faces, in every dazzling dance of a sent text message, in the cursory flip of a channel on TV, in the soulless kiss that was a hollow shell of years prior. It had been coming for weeks, for months, a ticking time bomb you can't find. But you can hear it, you can feel the rumble of the railroad track under you in the middle of the night.

I imagined the moment so much differently. Life, expectation, fucking never matches up. What I imagined as a bomb was little more than watching an incandescent light bulb flicker and die, it's filament breaking away in what little more than what can be described as... *pitiful.*

The talk on the couch, the distance between us was the Maginot Line. Palpable distance told me all I needed to hear, she could've never said a fucking word. And then just like that, it was done.

A final kiss goodbye, our tears dripping down becoming the mortar and our lips the bricks of a wall we built between us.

A final gasp of air in the form of intertwined fingers.

And that lingering glance as she turned to shut the door behind her, the one where you know you'll never see that person again.

The muffled sound of an engine turning over... fading. Fading.

Silence.

It was still, dark. If I closed my eyes I could almost smell the blood on the walls, on my hands, underneath my fingernails. I dropped to my knees. Unrelenting hardwood floor berated my knees pushing back against me. And then it happened. The low groan that turned into a wail. I stayed there awhile, on the floor. Just me.

Just me.

Morning light filtered through venetian blinds found me all the same.

Ground zero.

Zero.

This is bullshit. The passing recollection of the night before had stained the morning. *They will talk.* The collective Royal We would have their day at the mill, I knew what was waiting for me. Busy nobody's with nothing but time and the gift of gab. I was one of them after all. I knew the drill.

Vomit stirred and stunk as the remnants of my last retching filed into the sink drain. I could feel it in my beard, long from a month of a lonely razor in the bathroom.

I decided rather than hear and be disposed to the gossip of town that I would Don Draper this life. Well... minus ID fraud.

I didn't show up to work the next day, or ever again. Instead I woke up that morning, showered, and collected myself. Water pouring down my face concealing tears I counted out my steps. Mirror-facing and toothbrush hanging from my mouth I collected my thoughts. Shoes tied and binds unbound I begged myself for resolve. Cigarette lit and phone in hand I called my landlord and broke the lease. The words fell out of my mouth moreso than spoken. My cigarette fluttering about, the ash taking a path more akin to that of a bumblebee than anything else. I was only processing every other word from my landlord—"...remit... in case of... hope things are... leave the key... okay?" I nodded to no one, stammering an affirmative as the cigarette fell to the concrete porch, extinguished on my heel.

Now, what do I do with all this shit I can't take with me? Next phone call was a storage company. Wait, how do I get it all there? Next phone call, U-haul. Oh good, they were right down the street. I walked to it.

I returned and started, almost literally, just tossing the unnecessary shit of my life into it.

Couch can't fit in my car. In it goes.

TV isn't going with me, in it goes.

Look at all these clothes, and look at all hers! In they went.

Man... fuck this bed. My back hurts. Fuck you bed, you're not coming with me.

My ex-wife and I didn't have much, we led minimalist lifestyles. I remember the exact moment I drew the door shut on that storage unit and clamped the lock down. *That's step one.*

I filled my car to the brim with what I considered necessities. Guitar? Check. Clothes I'd need? Check. Laptop? Check. All that shit. I remember thinking it looked like I was homeless. *Oh shit. I am homeless.* Actually, the thought made me smile. Anyway.

Buzz. *Facebook notification? Oh.. delete this shit.* I deleted it all. No Facebook, no Instagram, no Twitter, no SnapChat, no LinkedIn, nothing. All of it, gone. And not just off my phone. The accounts were all deleted. It's like I was never there, digitally or in the flesh. *That's step two.*

Drove down to the landlord's house and returned the keys. *That's step three.* Another phone call. *Hi, yes I need to disconnect the electricity at 228 Glenn St. Yes. Yes. Billing address? Uh... 815 Buzzard Rock Drive, Kuttawa Kentucky. Yes. Thank you."* I thought that was cheeky. Ex-wife's mother's address.

Returned the U-haul and then I drove. No goodbyes. No parting text messages. As quickly as I arrived, I was gone even quicker. It was night at this point. I was a nomad. I remember careening down the interstate at one point and just howling at the moon with what felt like a new lease on life. *I'm free. I'm free. I'm free.*

I stopped driving after what felt like forever and the blink of an eye. I felt punchdrunk, engorged on possibility. *Nashville? Hm. Alright let's set up here.* I had been here a couple of times. I pulled in the back parking lot of a bar I had been to once because a band I liked said they had been there before. Silly reasons were the best reasons at the moment.

I looked at my phone. I had a couple of texts from friends asking if I wanted to go to our favorite bar that night. A missed call from another person. I never returned the texts. In the coming weeks those messages would increase in urgency and relevance.

Buzz. *Where are you?*

Buzz. *Did you delete me on Facebook?*

Buzz. *What the fuck man?*

Buzz. *Are you and her splitting up? What's going on?*

Buzz. *This is fucked up. No one knows what happened to you.*

Everyone, everything reminded me of her. I had to do this for me. Selfishly. If that was BC, this is AD. I had \$800 in my bank account. I was going to make this work. I had to. The bar had free wifi, pretty slow but quick enough to sift through craigslist for rooms for rent. I found a couple. *Message sent.*

I remember walking up the ramp that led into the bar, and reveling in what I had done. The air was different, it was a city after all. The people were faceless, just as I was now. It was a Thursday night in October. It was brisk. I walked in and sat down at the bar, there were a few people here and there. Some I remember seeing and little did I know I would come to call them my friends in time.

Hey stranger, what are you drinkin'?

"I'll have a bourbon on the rocks. My name is Reese, by the way. Nice to meet you."

I smiled.

Chapter One

He was a bit taller than I was, a thick red beard covered most of his face. Broad shoulders framed a faded Star Wars t-shirt that looked like it had been stained with the libations of a smoky dive bar many times prior to this chance encounter. That existential thought lingered longer than I expected. Everything was new. Everything was the first time. Life with the plastic wrap untouched.

Smoky dive bar... Oh right, hey I can smoke in here. My hands danced around the pockets of my jeans and jacket until they landed on the familiar corners of a cigarette pack. I drew one from the pack like a sword from its sheath, both are deadly one is just quicker about it.

He placed the drink in front of me; I gave him my debit card. Some bits of the system refuse to let you go. "I'm Nick by the way."

The words were a battering ram on my moment.

"Nick, nice to meet you. I'm Reese."

"Yeah you said that already," he chuckled to himself.

Oh, right. *You dumbass*. I smirked and took a draw from the glass. The liquor would not do me any favors but that's okay, I was more or less home. My home was waiting in the parking lot. The night wore on. I wore the night like a badge. I knew I had to figure something out soon, and that sense of urgency sat perched on the shoulder of my thoughts serving to casually remind me of my *I'm fucked* pin-prick sensation. I took another sip. Time was a lost concept, as lost as I was at the moment.

Knock, knock.

Knock, knock. Harder this time.

I stirred in the front seat of my car. A '95 Pontiac Grand Prix. You know the car, they are fucking everywhere. A tank, in weight, maneuverability and gas mileage. The damn thing will probably outlast the heat death of the universe. My dad has it now, he stills drives it to work.

I came to with the vague recollection of the end of last night. But that thought was interrupted by the police officer staring at me through the foggy window of my car. He motioned for me to step out.

Pin-prick.

Lie your ass off dude.

The door creaked open and wide, and I emerged, running a hand through my hair and adjusting my jeans that were hanging from my hips in a more precarious fashion than was comfortable.

“What are you doing here? Sleeping off last night?” his gaze fell through me into the back seat, which still had everything I had brought with me in it. “Or, you homeless?”

Pin-prick.

Yes and yes. “No officer, just passing through on my way... home.” I looked back at all my shit, patting the roof of the car as I leaned back against it. “We’re heading for... uh, St. Augustine.” Blood-shot eyes met a cynical gaze when my sight line met his.

Pin-prick.

Fuck. “I stopped here last night because I’d been on the road all day. Roads can be hypnotizing, yeah?” *Stop talking.*

The officer seem to relax a bit, shoulders dropped and his stance widened as if to relax. “Yeah, where you coming from?”

Truth. “Kentucky,” I fiddled in my pocket for my wallet, gave him my ID. *See? Good faith, nothing to see here.* My feet betrayed me as they danced nervously. A criss-crossing dance of anxiety.

He glanced at it like a library card. It was at this moment I realized I had no idea what time it was. Looking upward, the sky was gray, clouds obscuring the notion of a sun. It was cool, but not cold. There was traffic passing on the roads, but fuck all if I knew what that looked like in Nashville. My sleepy hometown resembled this place in no distinguishable form.

“Right, well if you’re leaving soon I’ll leave you be, but this is a private lot. Have a good one.” And just like that, he handed me my ID back, got in his car, and drove away. *Huh, guess a vagrant is the least of his concerns...*

My gaze followed his car down the road as he turned off it and out of sight. The wind kicked up and threw around my hair, making a mess even messier I was certain. The air was brisk and filled with the sounds of characterless white noise built from traffic and people. I rubbed my eyes and looked around, it was surreal to wake up somewhere and no absolutely nothing about a place. Even looking back now, this particular spot I am referring to which I know like the back of my fucking hand at this point, back then it may as well have been a foreign country where I couldn’t read any of the signs.

Pin-prick.

Across the street was... something? A windowless brick building with the faint noise of music coming from it. One door led in, and above it a red light shined brightly in the daylight.

Next to it, an alley, and next to that a gas station. *Express Mart?*

To my left, the bar. Behind me, the dilapidated parking lot of two restaurants, a venue, a vintage clothing shop, and a tax accountant. A smell was erupting from the dumpster that was sulking as most dumpsters do. Do dumpsters sulk? This one definitely was, or maybe I was starting to and I was projecting. Fuck it.

Five Points. The name was coined for the intersection of five streets next to where I was parked. I fumbled around in my car for a moment to find my phone. *What fucking time is it?* I found it but it was dead. Of course it was. An old beat up iPhone has the battery of an attention span. I looked over to see if the bar was open, it was. It had to be at least 10 a.m. then.

Shutting the door to the car revealed the fun-house mirror reflection of myself.

Pin-prick.

Shit dude, you need a shower. Well good luck with that you impulsive bastard. Grumbling, I crossed the street into the gas station, with a couple of toiletries in tow I had fished out of the car.

An Indian gentleman greeted me casually as he stocked a far shelf.

“You gotta bathroom?” the words fell out unceremonious and sloppy.

“Yes, but paying customer only.” He replied in a quiet tone.

I bought a pack of cigarettes and went about my business in the rest room. It was a single-stall, smelled vaguely of lysol and vomit, and had two lights above the mirror, one of which looked as burnt out as I felt. I set up my toiletries after a long piss; Deodorant, toothbrush, toothpaste, the bare essentials. I went to work.

My hair was still short enough that I could get by with running my hands through it with a touch of pomade. I snaked my deodorant under my shirt and hastily swiped away hoping the ripeness would stay away another day. I ran the water and my toothbrush under it, trying to get rid of that foul taste of cigarette and bourbon. I recall looking in the mirror and remembering the day before, how sure I felt. How certain all of this was. Now what am I?

I ran some water and splashed my face several times, dabbing away at the edges of my beard with a paper towel. Now... what am I? "What the fuck, man." I said it out loud, as if the person in the mirror would respond. If he could I'm sure he would've shrugged smugly.

It was then that it hit me. The reflection staring back at me under a fluorescent light seemed like a mask. It didn't seem real. *I* didn't seem real. I had reveled in a moment of impetuous clarity, but a rash reality was setting in: *Pin-prick.*

I have no idea what I'm doing.

I'm taking a whore's bath in a bathroom.

I drank too much last night.

I slept in my fucking car.

You are a fucking dumbass.

Give it time.

Trust yourself.

Solve the problem.

I stayed in that bathroom for a moment long enough to ride through the initial onslaught of emotions. Fear, panic, anxiety... then resolution. A casual nod to myself, and I was done.

I hit the light on my way out.

Standing outside the gas station, my back found the white brick wall in a lean. The intersection was bristling with traffic, vagrants pacing the sidewalk, pedestrians and patrons side by side. My thumb danced across the top of the lighter as sparks ignited and I took my first drag of the day.

Inhale, hold, exhale. *Inhale. Hold. Exhale.*

My head fell back, face tilted upward to a gray sky as my mind wandered away from the immediacy of my surrounding situation. About as close as I get to meditation is the nicotine-charged silence during the first couple of hits of a cigarette. Akin to diving underwater, or the glow post-coitus, the world always falls silent.

But, just like that, my thoughts fell on her. Nirvana, snatched away.

Dangerous thoughts followed. In the coming months it would be more common for my thoughts to cut deep internally. Emotionally I was hemorrhaging and the full tilt of which I wouldn't realize for some time. For all the good my moment of clarity provided just a minute prior, the realization that the woman I loved had left me had shattered, and would continue to shatter, every iota of levity I could muster.

Where are you... that was typically the first thought.

Who are you with... the second one.

Are you with him? And of course, *are you fucking him yet?* Morbid curiosity had a firm grip, I suspected she left me for this person; years later my suspicions were confirmed in a small bar back home when it slipped out of a friend's mouth over a beer. Even prodigal sons return home sometimes, after all.

Thinking you know, and knowing, were two very different things. The former is like swatting at a spider and being too squeamish to look and see if you killed it. You figured if you were bitten you knew you missed.

Let's just say it was smeared across the front page.

The mind ebbs and flows, and just like that the tide receded and I was sucked back into the reality of the moment like a fizzing soda in reverse. *Fucking what time is it.* I had forgotten to look for a clock in the gas station. It didn't matter, I knew I had to get my phone charged. I had shit to do and everything else be damned. I had plenty of time to ruminate about shit later. Grabbing my charger from the car I suddenly realized sleeping in it had done my back no favors. If my body could talk, it wouldn't bother and it'd just whip my ass in an act of self-flagellation.

The door to the bar complained in a metallic fashion as I lumbered inside. The bar itself was small, built out of a gutted home from God knows how long ago. The interior was decorated gaudily, mementos of Chicago memorabilia from their various sports teams were strung about in what looked like fever dream Mike Ditka would wake from in a cold sweat. Unbeknownst to me it was a Chicago sports bar. Could've fooled me, we were in Nashville what the fuck was this nonsense.

Smoke clung to the innards of the bar, which gave everything a grimy feel. Part of the aesthetic I guess. There were only a couple of people at the bar—an older man and someone who looked slightly older than myself—and the bartender, a short dark-haired woman. A far cry from Nick the night prior in terms of appearance.

She looks like her. My headspace cowered at the invasion of a moment.

Placing myself a few seats down from the other patrons, my fingers fiddled for an outlet, the plug fell in place and there I sat waiting for my phone to catch up with the day.

“Hi, can you flash me your ID?” the bartender spoke surely yet flippantly. I obliged.

“Kentucky? Headed somewhere?”

“No. Here to stay, for now,” I replied, less sure.

“Mmhmm, here to stay in our parking lot.” The remark was off-hand but on the nose.

Before I could respond she slid a glass in front of me with ice water in it, continuing seamlessly, “Nick said we had a visitor. You were in here last night.” The words were seemingly heavy over the white noise of whatever was playing on the jukebox. I had been found out, and it hadn’t even fucking been a whole day.

“I know. I’m new here, that’s all.” My words were a shield against what felt like a jab. I took a surprisingly refreshing drink from my glass.

Buzz.

I looked down at my phone.

Buzz. *Buzz.* *Buzz.*

Remnants of the night prior, little packets of text like leftovers from dinner. The time shined brightly over the queue of messages, 1:35pm. I both silently balked and sighed relief at the time.

Hey man, didn’t catch you out last night, let’s get together this weekend!

Dude, it doesn’t say you and her are married on Facebook anymore. Did you delete Facebook?

That Steelers game was bullshit.

Messages meant for someone else. I set my phone down and went back to my water, gauging the depths to which I had sunk and idly wandering the moment, aloof.

“How new?” Post-mortem interrupted.

I glanced up, the bartender was looking at me while pouring a beer from a tap. My brow furrowed inquisitively.

“You said you were new here. How new?” she reiterated, her black hair disguising most of her face in a veil as it flipped around with her attention.

“I glanced at my phone and back up, “Thirteen or fourteen hours, I suppose.” A head or two turned from the other end of the bar.

And 44 hours since you last saw your wife. God dammit, stop it.

She finished the pour and gave it to the older man, “Sounds about right judging from the amount of shit in your car.” Seems I was found out a lot sooner than I thought.

“Yeah... so is this the part where you kick me out or is that later in the itinerary?” My question was framed in a slight smirk, but really, I was curious as to whether I was going to have to abandon my makeshift plan.

“Not necessarily,” she replied with a slight weight shift in her stance, “but if the owner comes around and finds out you’re probably fucked.” Her tone was matter-of-fact enough that I took them at face value, softened by the realization that she was quite striking physically.

I blinked in a physical version of a stutter.

“Hm. Noted. Today’s Friday, right?” I knew the answer, but it was pointed more at feeling out the owner’s schedule. *Maybe I could move the car around, make it look like I am coming and going.*

“Yep, two for one’s until 7:00, stranger.” She replied.

“Oh, sweet Jesus...” Not what I was getting at. My poor liver.

“I’m Selina. Now order a beer before I make you leave for loitering.”

I glanced at her, an eyebrow perched high over her gaze, then over my shoulder through one of the windows. Umbrellas paced the sidewalk outside. It had started raining.

Who was I to say no?

Chapter Two

Days and time quickly lost meaning besides measuring the time between scouring Craigslist for a room to rent and looking for a job; the latter of which amounted to almost nothing without a reference, a background... or a shower. It's those days where that silent anonymity is both your best friend and true enemy. You're no one, but you're a blank slate for every jumped conclusion. You're no known quantity. You're faceless in the best and worst way.

I couldn't admit it at the time, but I could myself wasting away inside. It hadn't been long but every empty conversation, passing glance, lost introduction, restless night and haphazard morning was quickly eating at me. My inner monologue dripped with sarcasm at every turn, and it tore at me like a dull instrument. Maybe I had made a terrible mistake, maybe I should have looked before I leapt. It didn't fucking matter at this point, I was mid-stride with nothing but air beneath my feet.

Despite all that, the unquiet of my misgivings about this blind attempt at apparent nomadism, the budding alcoholism I could feel beckoning, the incessant burning in my lungs from cigarettes, the ache in my back from sleeping in my car; it stood in staunch contrast to my sleepy town and tomb of an apartment with her.

I still felt alive.

Nashville too felt alive, even at night when I dared to venture, sprawled out across the Cumberland Valley in twists and turns. Countless corners nestled with places to visit, tiny moments waiting to happen. Budding commerce was everywhere, but so was the urban rot that often comes with it. I never found it difficult to find an intersection dotted with a bohemian coffee shop, diner, tavern and thrift shops. But, take two turns and you'd find yourself surrounded by title loan signs, an abandoned gas station turned vagrant hideout, and the type of

convenience store that smells like a locker room, is just as damp, and confusingly offers an assortment of gluten-free options.

Eventually I would always find myself back to my designated hideaway. At first I didn't stray very far anyway, I couldn't afford it and I knew it. Fact is, it had been years since I spent this much time alone. Time to myself to lament, to wallow, to be angry but have nowhere to direct it but inward. Self-loathing was having a fire sale and I was buying stock.

My car crept to a stop on the corner. My gas gauge bouncing and settling just above empty. I gave myself the cursory once-over in the rear view. My hair was messy but I did have a clean shirt on, at least. I didn't care, I didn't know anyone here yet. I needed money. I glanced out at the record store I had parked in front of, the whistle of my car's air conditioning sounded more like death rattle. One thing I picked up from bits of conversation at the bar; weather is always the talk of the town and it was hot more often than not. The sweat on my brow could attest to that.

I fumbled about in the back seat and pried away the two dozen or so records she and I had accumulated over the years. I had planned for this... I knew if I needed to I could sell some or all of them to help me out. Buried in that back seat was a small white box with the ring in it... but today would not be the day I would sell that. I couldn't even open it, much less get rid of it. I buried the idea as deep as I could for now.

I perched the records on the trunk as I began sorting through them. Memories made out of cardboard, ink and vinyl. Some of them I had bought solely for me, a couple of them were anniversary gifts staring back at me with dead eyes, like the light had gone out in their life. The music on them was nothing now, only words in measures.

Right?

They were little more than husks now.

...Right?

Fuck it.

I walked out with \$54.

So, back to home base I went. Five in the tank, a pack of smokes in the pocket, and I eased my car back into a new parking spot behind Red Door. The sun was high and bright in the sky as I retreated inside with a fresh cigarette hanging loose on the lip. I could feel the grime of the weekend on my skin, literally. Just a dirty sinner on a Sunday in a bar, just past noon.

To my surprise (a reaction that would quickly fade as I grew to know the place), the bar was sheltering a handful of other people. A nod here and there, a hand through the hair, and I was nestled into a bar stool. The cigarette crackled to life with a deep draw, and breath. An action that wrestled the man behind the bar from his busywork.

“What are you having,” he inquired. I hadn’t seen him working before. He was a mountain of a guy with dark eyes framed by a massive beard and a 49’ers hat, “need to see your ID too,” he added.

I replied with a PBR, surrendering my license again.

“Ah, so you’re Reese...” his tone shifted from barkeep to bar manager on a dime. “So, did you leave our lot yet, today?”

I looked out to the lot, “Yeah. Just got back from the record shop down the road... needed the money.”

His beard betrayed the smirk I could hear, “In your situation I have no doubt, man. Look, about that, I--”

I cut him off, “I’m not trying to make a problem here I just don’t have another option a--”

“I know, I know,” he returned the conversational favor with a beer. “Selina told me what’s going on, it sucks to be in a hole.” He struck a moment, and that’s when he asked.

“You worked in a bar before?”

His tone clearly gave away his intention, I pounced on it and I lied straight through my teeth.

“Oh yeah, yeah back home I bartended through college.”

You mean a restaurant?

“Well, we don’t need a bartender but I could use a door guy. You’re a little small for it, but, you’ve checked ID’s before right?”

“Yeah.” *Nope.*

“Here...” he disappeared into the back for a moment, my gaze following him out of sight. I drew deeply on my cigarette and took a moment to gather my thoughts. I had to make sure I didn’t accidentally double down on anything I didn’t mean to. By the time he returned with a paper in hand, I had sorted out my web.

“Fill this application out,” he finished as I took a look at it.

Their logo adorned the top of it, but other than that it was your standard application. My mind was full of static from the weekend, for the time the beer seemed to help which I nursed carefully with a mild hangover.

Another hit from the cigarette, and the beat of a moment hanging in the air with Pat Benetar over the speakers went by.

“Thanks man... what’s your name?” I never was very good at sounding grateful.

“Daniel, now fill that out and take it to our other bar across town. Talk to the owner and tell him I sent you,” it was certainly an order, like a cop telling you to pull over on the corner.

I smiled, since fortune seemingly had as well. “You got it.”

The cigarette fell dim with the hint of burnt filter. I grabbed a pen from the bar and began scribbling away. I made up the address, the same one I had been using, feigning the street number of a small street I’d found. I kept my work history brief but tenured. It sounded like it didn’t matter so I wasn’t going to waste time worrying about it.

LIAR.

LIAR.

LIAR.

With every false note I left I felt it pang on my conscience.

Charity case. You pathetic lowlife. You fucking loser. But hey, pity is very becoming on you, apparently.

It was difficult to focus. This was no time for ego, this was my best shot. A close-to-zero just turned into an almost-sure thing, I'd be damned to let it go because I was concerned with their pity.

If only she could see you now... she'd be so proud of you. But she's too busy with her legs wrapped around him isn't she? You know that, right?

I sighed, downed the beer and drowned the thought. "Nick, you mind if I get another? And a well shot of whiskey too?"

I'm going to make this one hurt.

Dirge.

i need you to understand

it's impossible to

explain

i will never hate you

we were complicated

all of this is true

i swear

you'll know it's

ashes or cinders

once you hold

a candle to it

and see

flames in broad

Daylight

Chapter Three

“So, when can you start?”

Matt had asked me this question before, two years prior when I took a kitchen gig for him to replace my paid internship. Funding was cut at the university, and so was my position as a press release writer. Typical bureaucratic bullshit, in truth I was mildly devastated to lose it so unceremoniously.

One night when we were lying in her tiny twin bed, naked bodies entangled due to both necessity and sating a carnal ache for the other's touch, she'd recommended I talk to her boss. He had hired Her as a cashier at the first location in Murray, where we attended college, and now he was opening a second restaurant in Paducah, the small town we had decided to move to now that we were close to our wedding. It was a time full of opportunity for us. Though we had whittled our options down, it still felt bright, new, exciting and intoxicating. **Can't move here, can't do that, or this... but we can do this, and we can do it together.** Together.

The day was hot, a bright and sunny Kentucky day, not a cloud in the sky or a canopy draped overhead. We were tucked into a corner of the small patio that encompassed the front entrance of the new restaurant. Matt, wearing his usual cargo shorts, custom branded t-shirt and flip flops, sat patiently across the table sipping a beer. The posed question felt pregnant in the air with the humidity.

From a bird's eye view it would appear to be nothing more than three friends catching up, and to a degree it was. In the time that Matt had employed both of us we had become close friends. The kind that answered the phone when you needed help moving, when trouble struck our relationship or his marriage, drinking buddies wrapped around a bonfire, a sure shot with inside jokes. He trusted us nearly implicitly, or as close as anyone could that isn't blood related, I thought.

A deep sigh escaped as I pondered everything, my attention brought to the large neon sign adorning the façade. It hung there almost perilously, a gauche monstrosity.

“When I helped you build this place, I didn’t think I would be running it ya know,” I said, breaking the moment’s silence. “Maybe we should’ve been more careful with installing the hood vent,” I added jokingly.

“No worker’s comp for a stubbed toe, Reese,” he replied in his usual deadpan manner, “not that you’d pass it anyway.” With that he finished what was left of his beer.

“C’mon, yes or no.”

I broke my gaze from the flock of birds that had gathered on the powerline near us, pining for the next bit of food that they’d become accustomed to receiving from us. I looked at Her, she was casually flipping through her phone, legs crossed and her elbow perched on her knee. A pose she generally struck when she was bored out of her wits. I knew she was bearing the mid-day sun just for us so we could hash out this formality of a conversation. We had driven up from Murray and this stop, while not on the way to our destination, Louisville, was for the sole purpose of solidifying my new position as general manager of Matt’s newest endeavor.

She was dressed comfortably for the ride, a red Louisville Cardinals t-shirt and black leggings. Her pale skin was slowly starting to match her shirt. Long brown hair shielded part of her eyes, but she was still squinting down at her phone. A beauty in any light.

“So, we’re doing this?” I posed the question deliberately, to break her focus on her phone. I wanted her to have input despite knowing the answer, I just wanted her to be involved.

She looked up at me, her squint broadened, “Yeah, I guess so?” Her eyebrow raised reflexively. I could never tell if I picked up that physical inflection from her or vice versa.

Either way, I knew how to read her interest level from it and I could tell it was lacking more than she was letting on. It was hot out, and for now she was just along for the ride. On one hand I understood, but I felt that the moment should have been lent a bit more gravity. I surely felt the weight of it all. It meant another move, it meant moving in **together** for the first time, we would be married in four months, **it meant a fucking lot.**

The world seemed to pause in this moment. Traffic blurred around me, birds mid-flight, stop lights hung on yellow, a shallow breath bated. All the world in a mobile and strung up by a small line, awaiting a small answer to a question.

This meant so much to me, it was symbolic of a trusted expectation and journey. Like the ring on her finger. In that moment my eyes met the dancing glimmer of it, still shining brightly as the day I bought it. It gave me an earnestness, it was a promise after all. My eyes met Matt’s through his darkened sunglasses.

“Yeah, we are. Let’s start on the first of next month. Gives us time to pack and get moved up here,” I said, standing and offering a handshake. Matt stood as well, and met it.

“Good deal! Let’s do this, then.” His tone lifted from above the flatline it usually operated on. He was pleased with the deal. I was a bit solemn but determined. This was the beginning of our future, after all.

I smoothed out the front of my shirt, grabbed the empty beer can I was drinking from and tossed it in the garbage bin unceremoniously holding open the front door. The HVAC guys hadn’t installed an A/C unit yet so it was the only way to keep the air moving inside.

The three of us walked through the new place as Matt showed me the new additions since I had been in last. A walk-in cooler, new sinks, a small office. Paint and dust were still thick in the air of our discussion about how many people to hire, what the hours would look like, expectations on how busy the restaurant would be. Some things were impossible to know but, in all, I was fine with just having a good job. While our conversation churned, I could feel the hourglass of Her patience ticking away. We should've been on the road by now, a weekend trip to Louisville was one of our favorite things. We had a few friends living there, it was the closest thing to getting away from rural Kentucky mentality and not leave the state. I was ready too, to be honest, but this was my job now. And it was going to help us move there too, eventually. I had a plan.

"You sure you're up to it?" Matt leaned into the half-finished counter, asking like most people kick a tire to check for air pressure.

"Yeah, totally. I'll be able to keep a close eye. Hell, we're moving into a house right around the corner. Already got it figured out." My tone was sure, my plan was not but... **close enough**.

"Alright, well I gotta get back to it in here unless you have any questions."

"He doesn't," She said, leaning into me with her arm which was her universal signal for **'Please can we be done yet.'* *

"I guess not, we'll play it by ear anyhow you know how it goes," I said with a resigned and sly smile, leaning back into Her with a playful huff just for good measure. I had taken long enough, it was time.

We loaded back into Her car, my tank of a Grand Prix would've cost us twice the amount in gas to make the trip and who knew if it could even bear the burden of the trip. The Corolla had all our roadmixes anyway. We had a time-honored tradition of making mixes for each other and on road trips. This time was no different.

I started the car to get the A/C going, turned to Her and kissed her cheek. “You ready to blow this popsicle stand?”

“Yes please,” she replied, tuning the CD changer, “Louisville 2014 or bust.” Paducah only had five exits that ran through it, and the restaurant was near one, so we were on the road in no time.

My hand found hers at 75 miles an hour. It wasn’t long before she was nodding off, though.

“Wake me up at Beaver Dam?” She asked with the same assuredness that Matt had earlier.

“Of course dollface, I always do.”

The exits blurred by, I-24 was the straight and narrow... and we were on it.

Chapter Four

Dub wasn't a very tall person, a heavy resemblance to Michael Keaton and a quick smile nonetheless lent itself to an ineffable quality of charm. Tattoos covered both his arms... *wait, is he flexing?* I couldn't tell.

"Nick says you have experience working in a bar," his eyes danced across the application, "Vitello's, right?"

That last shot wasn't the smartest idea, my mind was already cluttered from the move and the buzz just felt like static, like a leg that had fallen asleep but the leg was my brain. It all felt so unfamiliar, like being in the deep end of a pool.

"Yeah, yeah that's right," I finally managed to reply. There was a sweat forming on my brow, I could feel it itching, betraying me in the moment. Suddenly, I was viscerally aware that I was slouching, I straightened up and braced myself on the round table in front of us. The bar stool was about as comfortable as a cafeteria bench.

"How long were you there?" His brow furrowed, tone dropped. My eyes flicked across his face desperate to glean any tell he may have. *Why is he asking me this? All the answers are right there...*

In that gaping moment I realized I had casually forgotten the small details of my "employment."

LIAR.

"On and off, Evo was a great guy but sometimes the bar was a bit touch and go. Worked next door to the place too during the off's... you know how it can be in a small town. But, in sum it was a little over two years. I just added the dates accordingly."

I riddled the answer off candidly, surprisingly. I didn't even know what the last part meant, I was hoping he would fill in the blanks for himself.

"Yeah no for sure. So, you're good with checking I.D. and knowing what to look for right? ABC here is crazy, it's a lot busier than what you're probably used to in," he paused to check, "Murray."

I nodded along, knowing damn well the only ID I had ever checked was my own.

Dub paused for a moment, setting aside the application and exchanging it for a red bull.

“What about your ABC license, is it still valid?”

Oh shit. I hadn't thought of that. I knew a little about the law but...

“No, when I quit to take over at the restaurant I was due to get it renewed but didn't bother since I wasn't serving anymore.” ...*but that's okay.* It gave credence to my story.

LIAR.

This seemed to satisfy his curiosity for the moment. He took a plug from his drink again pondering... something. I took the momentary pause in inquisition to inquire about lighting up. He didn't care.

I drew a cigarette from the pack and sparked the lighter, the flame licking at the exposed tobacco.

“You live in East?”

The question sounded innocuous, but I had heard enough people in the bar refer to it *as* ‘East’ and to be honest I wasn't sure if that's what he meant, or if he meant ‘Do you live on the East side.’ I quickly took a drag to give myself a moment, I couldn't recall the address I had written down.”

“...yeah, just, uhh, just up the road from the place. The bar.” Not my best performance.

It seemed he had heard enough, he slid off the bar stool to stand and cleared his throat.

“Well, I can't have you behind the bar unless it's valid. But, East does need a door guy for during the week and that's where I like to start people off anyhow. Pay is 13.50 an hour since you have experience. All you gotta do is check the I.D's as they come in, help clean up during shift and after, that sort of thing. Hours are seven to close, generally around three or four in the morning... Can you do that?”

I took a deep hit from the cigarette to mull what had just occurred. A sudden snap back to consciousness.

LIAR.

Yeah.. I was. So what.

“Yeah, what days are we talkin’?” I replied as casually as I could muster.

“Monday through Thursday nights, you’d start tomorrow.”

I tapped the growing ash thoughtfully for a moment, this seemed too easy. It made sense though, what did a bar care for an employee so long as they showed up on time and didn’t fuck anything up? You’re a pulse with some flesh and bone attached. For someone with a made up background, it was perfect. It signaled stability for the future in more ways than one.

“Sounds good to me, Dub. Let’s do it.” I shook his hand and left with the tax paperwork in a bit of a daze.

The winding path of the ramp led me back out onto the street. The area was surrounded by massive cranes for in-progress buildings in almost every direction. Urban progress and design stood in stark contrast to the sleepy town I called home just a few days ago.

I reached for the cigarette, pinching the filter with my fingers. The ember had begun to burn away at it, no longer useful. I spared the moment to regale my success, now I just had to find somewhere to stow all the shit filling my car, baking in the sun and daring to be stolen. I leaned on to it, the heat giving the pain in my back a small bit of relief. My eyes darted over the paperwork, nothing out of the ordinary, just your basic W-4. A stale taste of whiskey stuck to the back of my throat, begging to be quenched.

Suddenly I was intensely aware of how many people were in my immediate surroundings. Bars littered the stretch of road I was on, restaurants dotting the rest of the real estate while the bare skeletons of condos rose to meet the sky around us. A blinding fury of emotional tangents swarmed my thoughts.

She would be so proud of you right now.

Her ex-husband, the liar and the thief. You deserve it all, congratulations.

Homeless, a beat up car, a drunk, door guy... you really think this is something don’t you? You’re worthless, you’ve got nothing to offer anyone. You barely have anything to offer yourself.

I was in the car at this point, engine idling, my breath deep as I tried to silence the conversation within.

She'd walk right by and never bat an eye at you now.

Some country song filled my car with the sound of a steel guitar while I pounded at the steering wheel.

I said it out loud, plain as day, "Just because you're right doesn't mean you're not wrong."

I hit play on the CD player, pulled out into the street and took off back toward East side.

You can't outrun this, but you'll try anyhow. You always do.

Sum, Days.

Some days I feel strange. Like an alien on a road trip, snapping photos for a scrapbook that doesn't exist in a life that isn't mine. Like a boy in a costume in a bit part for a b-grade, direct to DVD movie. But there's no director to cut the scene. It just keeps going, and going, and the camera isn't even on me.

Some days I feel like a fucking psycho. Who am I, whose hands are these? Are they mine? They don't look like it, some days. And where is she? Who are you and what are you doing with my heart in your hands? *Why is there so much blood?* Maybe if I keep picking at the scab it won't come back this time.

I just want to lay down and let it consume me, some days.

I'm not a psycho if I just quit fighting, right? But I can't do that, no I can't just lay down but what the fuck am I supposed to be doing? Punching at ocean waves, I'm tired. I'm so tired of fighting that the riptide looks welcoming. Drag me out to sea...

Some days I feel like I am not real. The dreamer could wake any moment and I would cease to exist. I am a dissociated mannequin, on display for pedestrians and vagrants. But, I come alive only at night to pick myself a part in mourning light. Replacing parts of myself to entice the next passerby, only to return to the darkness and try another equation, another combination to a lock around my life.

Some days I'm in such a goddamn rush; clambering to red lights, a caught breath is wasted. And sometimes I feel like nothing but the personification of a stroll, casual and complacent in a pond of time. Some days I am the first drag off a fresh cigarette. And others I am the stamped butt in the ashtray.

Some days I feel like I am fire. Bringing light to the world and showing the way for others who are lost at sea. A fire burning bright but not meant long for the world, a hurried blaze that knows its time is near. *Here, follow me! I can help you, see I can help you! I can be good too. I can be kind, and passionate and not just cynical and unaffected.*

Let me set you ablaze; let's burn bright together today, right now.

Right now! There's no time like the present... *but why are you hesitating?*

And some days I feel like nothing at all. Just a fleeting glance in every one's periphery. Some days that feels fine, as I pass through my time here unscathed and unbothered by the merciless reality of life. Other times I can't scream loud enough to beg for the attention of a complete stranger or a close friend. Inside I am the rolling sea, I boil like hot oil on the surface, slow and convective, churning heat hiding a searing pain.

And some days I feel like the king. I am the loudest cowboy in this fucking town, and you know it don't you? *Yeah, damn right you do.* I swing the bat around these parts. The quickest mouth and fastest hands belong to me. A monument to daring, harrowing gall. Look at me, and you'll know, I shot first. The man people want to stand beside, just make sure to hold your applause until the end. I'm the one Sinatra warned your grandparents about.

And there are other days where I am just the pawn, yeah? You get played for the bit you are and then you're cast aside with the others, back to the mill you go. A piss ant plebeian, a peon not even worth the space he takes up on a chessboard. Get this shit out of the way and let's move on to the real pieces that matter, yeah?

I can't fix anything, I can't make you smile, I can't make you feel anything anymore. Did I ever make you feel alive? Which version of me was it, where's the reset button on this piece of shit?

Some days. As if these days were all self-contained. These days were all the same day. Fuck, maybe I am crazy, but for the life of me I don't think I am. This crisis of character? It's just a monologue to a show that doesn't exist. Every day a new episode, a new development. Every day, a new feeling, a new coping mechanism, but all the same culprits.

The same brand of whisky.

The same rolled dollar bill.

The same little white bags.

The same ketamine bowls.

The same flames made by the same sparks in the same dark rooms with the same people.

Some days feel like the same day over and over and over again.

Even now in my solitude I just have to sit and laugh. In the same breath I could just lay in bed and cry.

Some days I stare at myself in the mirror for longer than what would be considered normal. In those private moments, I often find myself saying uncouth things to myself. I know they won't do any good but some days you just have to say it out loud so you're not always fucking thinking it.

And for all those days, there are some where I simply feel okay. And those days? Those days I live for.

Because those days I don't have anything to say about.

Tiny Little Explosions.

they say Monet had cataracts
late in life,
vision gone bad

what a world to see
with no syntax

light is just
tiny little explosions to me

what a world to capture
all these little dots,
with precision

are tiny little miracles

forget-me-nots

to me

Chapter 5