

BOHEMIAN STREET

She lived in an old apartment on Bohemian Street. A massive window looked over the neon signs and lampposts and snow falling on the sidewalk. The moon and the city lights were the only things that illuminated the dark room where I now found myself, on a dusty leather couch. And she was right in front of me, sitting on the coffee table – the same brown eyes that I used to spend hours drawing when we were little, trying to capture all the magic and fire in them. Only now, if I were to draw her eyes, I'd draw two black holes in two seconds.

“I can't believe it's really you,” I said. I hadn't seen Jane since last year.

“In the flesh,” Jane said. “What are you doing here, Stuart?”

“I—uh—”

“How did you find me?”

“Your mother gave me your address.” – *ten months ago* – “She misses you.”

Jane let out a laugh. “Whatever.”

“You bleached your hair,” I said.

“You're still wearing that hoodie,” she said smiling, pointing at the black-and-white hoodie she'd given me on our freshman year.

I smiled back at her. “Yeah.”

“So...” Jane said after a while. “You didn't answer my question – what are you doing here?”

“I—” I gasped. I had played this moment so many times in my head over the last months – everything I was going to say to her. I looked down, taking a deep breath, and that's when I noticed yellow-faded pigments around dry black dots all over her arms.

“What happened?” I asked, pointing at the bruises.

“Nothing,” Jane said, getting up abruptly from the coffee table and walking over to the windowsill. I got up as well and walked over to her, stopping a few feet behind.

“Jane—”

“My mom sent you here to spy on me, didn’t she?” Jane said, still with her back to me.

“What?” I asked. “No. Listen, I—”

“Tell her I’ve been clean, alright?” Jane turned to me. Her voice was shaking, as if she was about to crack. In all my years knowing Jane, this was the closest I had come to see her crying.

“Jane—”

“Here,” Jane said, walking over to the coat hanger near the door and grabbing something from her jacket pocket. She grabbed my hand, placing the object on my palm. I looked at it – it was a token. It read: ‘N.A 1 MONTH CLEAN!’

“Give her that as proof, will you?” she asked.

I looked Jane in the eyes again. I could see pleading in her eyes.

“I will,” I assured her and put the token in my pocket.

“I – I’ll be right back,” she said, crossing the small apartment and closing the bathroom door. I stood still for a moment, not knowing what to do or say. I paced around the apartment and noticed a small glass jar in the kitchen counter. It was filled with what looked like poker chips, until eventually I got closer and recognized it – those were tokens, just like the one she had handed to me a moment ago. I took the lid off and shoved my hand down the jar, already dreading what I’d find in there.

I took one out. It read: ‘N.A CLEAN 1 MONTH!’ I took another one. ‘N.A CLEAN 1 MONTH!’ Another one. ‘N.A CLEAN 2 MONTHS!’ One more. ‘N.A CLEAN 1 MONTH!’

The door to the bathroom opened. I closed the jar quickly and turned around so she wouldn’t see what I was doing. Jane’s bleached strands were sticking to her forehead, her face was wet and the

cheeks red. She'd washed her face which meant she'd cried. I closed my fists, fighting the urge to walk over and hug her.

"Come home, Jane," I blurted. Last time I'd seen Jane was just a few days before she dropped out of school in sophomore year, nearly twelve months ago. I thought of her as if she was this perfect girl who was way out of my league, I'd forgotten how breakable and human she was. "I miss you. Your mom misses you. Get out of this place." I gestured to the clumsy apartment, "Out of this street. You don't belong here. I can help you--"

Jane looked down at her feet and let out a soft laugh.

"What?" I asked.

"Can I show you something?"

Jane pulled open a metal back door to an old building a few blocks away from her apartment. I crossed my arms, shivering with the December cold. "Come on," she said, walking in. I hesitated but followed. My mind was wandering to where the hell Jane had brought me, but my thoughts were cut short when she opened a door and bright yellow LED lights blinded me for a second.

"Hey," Jane said. I looked around. We were in a dressing room, and there were about seven or eight people sitting on a ring of chairs at the center of the room.

"Jane, darling," a woman said. She was loaded with make-up, her eyes were wide and green and her black thick hair was combed like she'd come from the 70s. "I thought you weren't coming tonight, is everything alright?" the drag queen said.

"Everything's fine." Jane grabbed my arm to pull me closer. "Everyone, this is Stuart."

All of them stared at me in silence as if they'd seen a ghost.

“This is my support group...” Jane turned to me. “And that’s Esmeralda. My sponsor.” She pointed to the drag queen.

The image of the jar with a bunch of N.A buttons crossed my mind.

“Well, you’re welcome to join us tonight, Stuart. We’ve heard a lot about you.” Esmeralda smiled.

“Great, we’re just gonna head to the bar,” Jane said. “Come on, Stu.”

I didn’t move.

“It’s just water. Stop being so... you.”

I followed her. We crossed an empty stage. The lights were on, there was a lot of popcorn spilled on the floor, but no one was in the audience. It looked like the end of a show. Journey’s *Don’t Stop Believing* was playing on the speakers on the walls. I wondered if Jane still remembered our dance on our school’s talent show back when we were twelve. We had practiced an entire routine and won second place. It had been the perfect day.

When we reached the bar, she asked for two sparkling waters.

“They heard a lot about me?” I asked.

“There’s nothing wrong with my street, Stuart. Those people in there are the ones who have been helping me all along,” Jane said, ignoring my question and thanking the bartender for the water.

“I can see how much they helped you.”

“What does that mean?”

“I found your jar with the bunch of N.A buttons. This isn’t your first time clean, nor the longest...”

“You know what? Fuck you, Stuart,” Jane said and stormed out, making her way back to backstage. “You don’t know shit, ok?”

I went after her.

“What I know is that you’ve left a bunch of people behind that misses you for– this.”

“Who misses me? My mom? She forgot she had another daughter the moment Lenny died. And you say you miss me, Stuart, but you’re only here now. What about all the other months?”

“I tried, Jane!” I said, running to stand in her way. I got so close to her that I could see the nearly-faded freckles under her eyes. I put my hands on her shoulders. Her bones were so fragile, I felt like I’d break her. “I tried but I was scared you’d shut me out like you did the week Lenny... you know,” I confessed.

Jane was quiet.

“What?” I asked.

Jane held my hands. “I have something to say to my support group. Can you stay and listen?”

Like always, I couldn’t say no to Jane.

When we returned to the dressing room, Esmeralda had already placed two empty chairs in the circle for me and Jane to sit, but Jane remained on her feet.

“If it’s OK, can I share something now?” Jane asked.

“Of course, honey,” Esmeralda said.

Jane smiled timidly and took something out of her coat pocket. It was a piece of wrinkled notebook paper.

“I guess you all already are sick of me reading this out loud–” Jane said, and the circle laughed. “But this is a special occasion.” She locked her eyes on me. I felt trapped in my chair, as if her eyes were chaining me to my seat.

Jane cleared her throat. “Dear Stuart–”

It was nearly 11pm when we were out on the streets again. We left the club through the backdoor, everyone saying goodbye to each other. Jane and I stood on the sidewalk, the snow falling on our eyelashes.

Esmeralda was the last one to walk out.

“Handsome on the outside, beautiful on the inside,” Esmeralda said looking at me. “Good job, honey.” She winked at Jane. “Alright, I need to go. Give me a call if you need anything?”

Jane nodded, saying goodnight.

When it was finally just the two of us again, we started walking down the street, making our way back to her apartment.

"The club is Esmeralda's. It used to be a strip club but now kind of works as a rehab for bohemians." Jane laughed. "There are a lot of lost causes around here."

I nodded, understanding.

“So... were you ever going to send me that letter?” I asked after a while.

“Yes. No. I don’t know,” Jane shrugged, “I was scared.”

“Scared of what?” I asked.

“You,” she said, looking at her feet. “I don’t know, Stu. You’ve always put me on a pedestal. I didn’t want to let you down.”

“You could never let me down, Jane,” I said.

“See? Right there!” She lifted her head to look at me. “You have to stop this, Stuart.”

“Stop what?”

“Looking at me like I wear a halo. I’m just a person. And people disappoint people.”

“Jane—”

“I wrote the letter the first time I got sober,” she said. “Actually, I only got sober because of the letter. Esmeralda was trying to get me clean for weeks, but I wasn’t listening. And then one day she saved me from drowning in my own puke...”

I made a face.

“Disgusting. I know. That day she told me that if I didn’t get clean, I’d die. And that if I didn’t wanna talk to her than I should talk to somebody I trusted. I found myself writing to you.”

I didn’t say anything.

“I promised myself that if I managed to stay clean for at least a year, then I’d send the letter to you. I got two months. And then my mom called.”

I closed my eyes.

“It’s not Esmeralda’s or anyone else’s fault but my own why I relapsed so many times. It was all me. I’m not perfect, and I have a problem.”

“Do you think this time will be different?”

Jane shrugged. “I hope so. I don’t wanna look too far ahead, otherwise I’ll end up just going back to where I was.”

We reached the entrance to her building and Jane turned to me. She was about to say something when music started to come from a bar on the other side of the street. Journey’s *Don’t Stop Believing*.

Jane smiled and walked to the middle of the street. “How was it again? It started like this...” She lifted her right hand up and started shaking her hair up and down. I laughed.

“You remember?” I asked.

“Don’t leave me dancing here alone, city boy,” Jane said.

We danced the four minutes of that song and it was as if we were twelve again. When it was over, I took my phone off my pocket and saw the time. It was almost midnight. My mom had called me three times.

“Everything ok?” Jane asked.

I showed her the time.

“Oh.”

“I should go.”

Jane nodded.

“Come with me,” I tried.

“I can’t,” she said. “Not yet.”

I nodded, closing my eyes. Jane put her hand on my cheek. I opened my eyes to stare at hers, and I saw the fire in them again.

“Here,” she said, taking the letter out of her coat’s pocket. “I think it’s about time you have this.”

“Are you sure?”

“I don’t need it anymore,” she said, putting the letter on my jacket’s pocket without taking her eyes off mine.

Jane grabbed my shoulders and pulled me in for a hug.

“I’ll see you in a year,” I whispered into her shoulder.

Jane smiled. “I really hope so—”

“I’ll see you in a year, Jane,” I repeated and kissed her cheek.

“Goodbye, Stuart.”

She opened the door to her building and disappeared inside.

The bus stop was right in front of the Eurydice Bar, where the music was coming from. I didn't look back; not even when I was already inside the bus.

RESPONSIVE CRITICAL UNDERSTANDING

Bohemian Street was heavily inspired by one of my favorite Broadway musicals, *RENT* (1996) and the coming-of-age novel *Paper Towns* (2008) written by John Green.

On its first versions, there was a lot of background exposition, especially on Stuart's life. However, workshop feedbacks helped me realize that his backstory wasn't relevant for the story I wanted to tell. In fact, as the story developed, I did my best to keep backstories to a minimum. According to Buckham (2016), "Subtext is the message we want our readers to understand without telling them directly. It adds depth and complexity. It builds an experience that remains in the readers' awareness." At the end, not even Jane's backstory was fully explored – only the relevant keys that were going to drive the plot forward, after all, *Bohemian Street* is a piece about letting go of the past and moving on. Moreover, I had dialogues that originally were too on-the-nose that I ended up moving to subtext – "Subtext is not what we say in our story, but how we say it." (Buckham, 2016). Originally, Jane and Stuart said 'I love you' to each other by the end of the story. However, I realized the readers could already see Stuart's love for Jane – and vice-versa – throughout the piece, with their words and actions. Examples of that are the way Stuart talks about Jane's eyes, the simple fact that he went to see her, Jane's letter to Stuart, etc. King (2000) said that the key to writing good dialogue is honesty, and I decided that it wouldn't sound real if they said the words 'I love you' out loud.

One of the other reasons why I chose to delete the bits about Stuart's backstory was because my piece was not about him – it was about Jane. At one of the workshops, I was asked why I didn't write on Jane's point of view. My choice to use Stuart as the first person narrator was due to the message I wanted to send about how people sometimes – regardless of being in love or not – idealize people. From the start to the end of the story, Stuart's perspective on Jane changes a few times. For example, at the beginning, he's exhilarated to finally see her, and then he's shocked on finding out about her addiction. Later he gets angry and then sad for her, until he eventually accepts her as being just a human being with flaws and qualities. There's also a subtle touch of 'unreliable narrator' since we can't actually know who Jane really is as a person, since we're only seeing her through Stuart's eyes.

“An unreliable narrator is a character who tells the reader a story that cannot be taken at face value. This may be because the point of view character is insane, lying, deluded, or for any other number of reasons.” (Now Novel, n.d).

Bohemian Street is a story that I found – after my second draft – is full of symbolism. According to King (2000), part of the work of a second draft is to detect symbolism and theme. He says, “Symbolism doesn’t have to be relentlessly brainy, nor does it be consciously crafted. If it is there, you should bring it out as well as you can, polishing it until it shines.” The support group at the backstage of a club, the song they dance to, the name of the bar, were all meticulously thought out in order to give the story deeper meaning.

Jane was a particularly complex character to write. Her personality went from cold and witty, to sweet and unstable, until eventually I found her voice – she became more “real”, less stereotyped and easier for readers to relate to. “Compelling characters are not cogs in the machine of your plot; they are human beings to whom the story happens.” (Corbett, 2011). Originally, she wouldn’t be sober, and Stuart would help her get to that point, but it wasn’t long after that I decided to change it, because I didn’t want Jane to be saved by anyone other than herself. Plus, putting her at an early stage of sobriety gave space for vulnerability, which added more depth to the character. According to Corbett (2011), “When people appear wounded or in need of our help, we are instantly drawn to them – it’s a basic human reflex.”

Bohemian Street tackles the sensitive subject of drug addiction, so I had the challenge to write something that walked the line between not sugar-coating nor triggering the subject to the readers. “Keep it real. Handle with care. Don’t be afraid to be raw, emotional, and vulnerable.” (Jessen, 2016). I knew I wanted to show the ugly side of the addiction – I described the track marks on Jane’s arms and I wrote the line about Esmeralda finding Jane ‘drowning in her own puke’ so I could show the severity of it. Also, the fact that it wasn’t Jane’s first time sober showed how relapse is part of recovery – but at the same time, it is shown that Jane never stops trying – hence, she’s sober again. Jessen (2016) says: “When writing about difficult subjects, add in a healing aspect. Healing should be

part of your character arc. (...) It gives the reader hope.” The support group and Esmeralda are there to show how Jane has people that are willing to help her, and it wasn’t until she accepted Esmeralda’s help and admitted that she had a problem, that she started getting better.

By my final drafts, it came to my attention that I had a couple of points in the story where I could’ve ended, and my workshop tutor gave me the advice to pick one of them, otherwise, it’d just feel like I’d be stalling the reader from getting to the end of the story. I chose the ending with the hug and the line *“I’ll see you in a year”* because I felt like it was the strongest of all my options and the furthest away from clichés.

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