

The Next Exit

There was a seemingly infinite expanse of black asphalt ahead of me; framed by a warm rainbow of autumn leaves, all thumb tacked to the dense forest of highway oak trees. I couldn't keep my eyes on the kaleidoscopic road though. We may have been moving, but nothing was changing. Just as most still life is too boring to appreciate as real art, its only purpose is to break up the monotony of dull wallpaper. The road was my still life, and Jesse was my art.

Jesse D'Marco was thrashing his body in a violent rhythm to the screaming of the guitar solos he was playing for me on his phone speakers. I wasn't just watching him as he performed, I was staring. Examining him in awe and wonder. His hair was short, brown, and spiked up in the front. He had a long straight nose, with small, almost bubble wrap shaped nostrils. Jesse was the only person I ever met whose nostrils were worth noticing. I had never paid any attention to a detail like that on anyone else before him. Maybe I was excited by the rage I could see in them when they flared, or maybe it was how they lined up perfectly with his dimples when he smiled. On his nose sat a pair of reflective, silver aviators hiding his grey-blue eyes. But my favorite part of him were his lips. They weren't particularly beautiful, in fact, they looked as hard and rough as a jagged stone. But the way they could taste, was a mystery that tantalized and tortured me at every meal we shared.

I could look at his face anytime during conversation though, so I allowed myself to become transfixed by his body for as long as I could without repercussions. While he was shaking vigorously in his seat gripping the dashboard, too busy to notice my glances, I was able to watch his muscles glisten in the sunlight. His build rivaled Michelangelo's *David* carved out

by his dedication to hockey practice. His smooth chest and his thick arms were on display in nothing more than an olive-colored tank top, and his le-

"What do you think? Did you feel that shit, or what?" Jesse asked.

"Huh?" I asked robotically.

"Tell me I'm right. Tell me that you felt something from that."

"Oh," I said as I tried to recover my focus back to both my driving, and Jesse's question.

"It was alright, I guess." How long had I stopped watching the road for?

"You *guess* that Funeral Pyre, a fucking musical work of genius, is just *alright*? What is wrong with you?"

The only musical piece of genius is in the way you say *fuck*. I shook my head to get rid of that thought. "I mean, I can't understand what they are ever saying. It's just-"

"Don't you dare say: '*It all sounds the same.*' You're better than that," Jesse interrupted.

"Their screaming conveys the suffering and anguish everyone feels, but are too afraid to let out. The rawest of all human emotions. Even if you don't know what they're saying, you should be able to *feel* it."

Feel me Jes-. Shut up. Shut up. Shut up. "I do, sure-"

"You're a pussy is all."

"What?" I asked.

"It's no big deal. My best friend is a pussy. We can listen to some of that indie shit you like, or some of that pop-punk like back in the day. I just thought I could expand your taste in music a little today, but I guess I was wrong."

"Hey I like the guitars and stuff, I just-"

"Put on your indie stuff; it's fine." He turned the speakers of his phone off and shook his head. He hunched his legs back up onto the seat and returned to the sketch pad by his side.

"All right," I chuckled in the manner that people tend to do when something's not funny, but for some reason need to laugh anyway. I turned the power to my radio back on and let my Mumford and Sons CD resume playing. "So how long has it been since you've seen Nina?" I asked after about a few minutes of driving with arid silence between us.

"Just a few days, you know, since my car crapped out on me," he looked up from whatever he was drawing and lit a cigarette.

"Are you excited to see her again?"

"Well, you're joining us on our date, so how excited can I be going into this knowing that I'm not going to get my dick wet?" he replied, rolling down his window.

"You've been together for three months, why do you talk like she's nothing more than a living sex doll? She must be more important to you than that to be with her this long."

"I don't need to explain myself to you," Jesse replied.

"You're my best friend. It'd be nice if you explained your feelings every once in awhile, like you just did when you spoke about Funeral Pyre."

He shook his head again and blew more smoke out of the window. "Well, what about you? Are you seeing anybody?"

"Me? What? No. I would've told you already if I was," I stammered.

"Okay, but I've never seen you with anybody. Do you *like* anyone, or have a little crush? Hell, I'll settle for your favorite celebrity that you jerk off to."

"Who I jerk off to, seriously? Come on." Oh God, Jesse stop. I hate lying to you. The top of the steering wheel was slathered in sweat from my palm. I could feel my heart knocking against my ribcage as I tried to find a way to avoid the subject.

"*Excuse* me," he said. "I thought you just said best friends share with each other."

I bit my lip and concentrated on the road as we approached the welcome sign to Drieburg County. We were close to Nina's, so Jesse basked in what was left of his cigarette. I turned up the volume on my CD and reflected on the emotions that Nina brought up in me.

She resembled Taylor Swift when she large curly hair, except hers was chestnut colored instead of blonde. She had beautiful, white teeth without the help of braces. Her skin was fair and dotted with a million tiny auburn freckles. I'm sure the kids she babysits could play hours worth of connect the dots on her skin. Overall, she was pretty, but somewhat vanilla, honestly. Someone Jesse should be with, I suppose. She and I became friends last year in our junior year Spanish class. I introduced the two when Jesse came over to my place while Nina and I were doing a group project. When he went to the bathroom, she asked me about his situation, and when she left, he asked the same question. She was such a sweet and happy person, delightful to be around. It made me feel sick with guilt that I had come to resent someone so nice to me just because I lust for her boyfriend. I cradled so much angst inside that he was *only* my best friend.

I never had feelings for him until I saw them together, then I became sick with Jesse Fever. It was the first time he became off limits, and that excited me. We spent all of our time together as kids, and then she came along and showed me there were new levels two people could have with each other. I wasn't oblivious to this, I mean I've been through sex ed and have seen my share of romantic comedies. It's just that this was the first time that I felt like a third wheel to someone important. I needed to have him back.

About thirty minutes of driving had passed, and darkness began to trickle over the sky when we pulled up to the porch of her front house after driving down the bumpy gravel driveway.

"Hold on, I'll go get her," Jesse said.

I leaned my head back and took a deep breath to compose myself. You like Nina. She's just great, remember? Come on, try to remember what it is you like about her. Almost all of the things I could think of involved food or other Spanish projects we did together. Like when we had to bring in a dish that related to the heritage. I was shit at cooking, but I wanted to bring something that would impress the class, not just Fritos. I asked her for help with making arroz con pollo, while she made churros for dessert. We each had a churro right away and she hit me in the nose with one after she dipped it in chocolate and we couldn't stop laughing.

Alright, I feel a bit better. So all you have to do is not think about how that lucky bitch has what you don't. Just ignore the fact that she can kiss him all the fucking time, and you still don't know how those stones feel as they sand your lips into a pulp. I looked back down at the steering wheel and wiped my palm sweat off of it.

Fresh air should help me calm my nerves. Get the lingering smell of Jesse's cigarette, and his body spray, out of my nose. I stepped out of the car and leaned on the door as I looked at her gorgeous colonial house. I envied her for that too. The giant house, with her giant loving family living inside. Some people just get everything. I kicked the rocks around the driveway and took pride that I own something cool like a Camaro, while she just has a Honda. Score one for me.

"Hey Andy!"

I turned around and before my eyes could even focus, Nina wrapped her arms around me in a tight hug and lifted one of her boots in the air. I put my arms around her to reciprocate. "Hi Nina, how ya been?"

"Oh just swell Andy, thanks. How are you my dear?"

"Same old. Same old," I shrugged as I formed a close-mouthed smile and tried not to vomit at how her greeting felt like an innocent 1950's sitcom.

Jesse and I hopped back into our seats and Nina sat behind Jesse, as we headed to The Black Dahlia. The Black Dahlia was the best of both worlds for the college crowd; half coffee shop, half booze palace. The crowd would change based on what night you went. It would start as an artsy coffee shop early in the week transforming slowly into a bar by the weekend. Mondays were for artists to display, sell, or just show their stuff. Tuesdays were for open mics. Wednesdays were left open for events, though the usuals referred to it as Weed Wednesdays and went there stoned. Thursdays were karaoke. And on Friday after nine, they stored the tables outback and make it a club, strobe lights and all. This was the first time we were going to try getting in for anything besides coffee, so we figured we would go to something that wasn't as

high profile as a Friday. Which led us to deciding on going tonight for Thursday karaoke so we would be less suspicious than the club-boppers.

"I'm still really nervous about tonight," Nina said.

Jesse pulled out the fake ID's from his pocket and fanned them out. "What's there to worry about when they look this clutch, Miss Lewinski?" Jesse asked.

"No, no, no, no. Tell me that's not the name they gave me?" Nina whimpered as she reached over the front seat and grabbed the cards from his hand.

"Nah, I wish. That'd be hilarious," he said elbowing me.

"Catherine Espinosa... You think I could really pull off a name like that?"

"Well," Jesse said, "I thought the dark hair and freckles would make you seem like you were biracial."

"What if the bouncer is Spanish and I can barely form a sentence?"

"Then what would be the point of taking Spanish every year?"

"Oh, Lord. Let's take a look at the two of yours. Hmm, in the pilot's seat we have, Fredrick Delmonico. Ooh, sounds so regal."

"What a name," I said. "You think I look like a Freddy?" I made my best pout and tried to look distinguished.

"You do now," Jesse said.

I said it aloud once more, "Freddy Delmonico. I like it. Do I look Italian enough?"

"I think so," Nina smiled.

"Now that I think of it, you're not that hairy enough."

"What?" Nina asked.

Jesse gestured to my torso. "He doesn't have any hair popping out of his collar, dead giveaway. Damn my overactive creativity."

I laughed and Nina leaned into the front seat. "What are you doing?" I asked her.

"Seeing if opening a button would help," she said as she undid one of the buttons on my polo.

"Not really," Jesse said, "but it at least fits the attitude of an Italian man."

"Okay, so what about Jesse?" I asked.

"Ah, yes. Over here, the name of tonight's copilot is- Drum roll, please." Nina stated as Jesse started banging the dash and I tapped the steering wheel. "Tonight's copilot is... Peter Thompson? But, that's so boring."

"Not everyone has interesting names, Nina."

"But then why make both our names so interesting?" she asked gesturing her hands back and forth between both of us.

"Variety. It's suspicious if we're all really cool, or not cool at all. This way we all have believable first names and the last names were out of our control. Trust me."

"Alright, why don't we just move on? If they work, perfect. If not, at least we tried," Nina said.

"If we don't get it, then that's \$200 we just threw down the drain," Jesse muttered.

"Anyway," Nina began, "did you decide what song you're going to sing, Andrew?"

"You think I'm singing?" I laughed.

"You think you're not? You always say you won't at parties, but then you drink just enough to change your mind," Nina continued.

"Yeah, the suspense is killing us over here," Jesse said. He started to lean over and moan "Tell us. Tell us!" in a zombie voice. "We must know!" he said just before biting my ear.

A spark flew down my spine and I swerved the car. "Stop! I'm driving!" I laughed.

"Only if you sing me 'Somewhere Only We Know' because you know I love it when you're all deep and brooding."

"Okay, okay! But if you don't stop now we won't make it there for me to get drunk and sing!"

Jesse sat back in his seat and I was suddenly filled with disappointment. "Relax. The road is empty, puss."

"Don't call him that!" Nina exclaimed.

"You can relax too. Tell Nina what calling you puss means."

"It's like babe," I said as we smiled at each other, "but for dudes."

"It's demeaning and gross, save it for when I'm not here, weirdos."

"Fine," Jesse said as we pulled into the parking lot.

The two of them both had scowls on their faces as we left the car and headed to the line outside The Black Dahlia. There was a slight tension between them that I didn't quite understand, and quite honestly didn't care to. I was preoccupied with that smile of his... *babe*... the way his eyes were locked with mine for that split second... *babe*...

The brief silence we shared was cut by the bouncer who asked for our ID's and studied our faces like the back side of a *Highlight's Magazine*, searching for mistakes. He banded our arms and told us to have fun with a lackluster amount of enthusiasm.

"See? My plan totally worked," Jesse said.

"Do you think he even read the names?" I asked.

"Of course he did, did you see how he looked at all of us?"

"I don't think he believed us, I bet he was being nice," Nina said.

"He wouldn't risk his job just to be nice," Jesse retorted.

"It's not packed like a Friday, what does he care?"

Jesse rolled his eyes. "Whatever."

As we melted into the fog of the Dahlia, there was a girl in a zebra print dress singing 'Roxanne' with a spotlight focusing on her.

"I'm going to go sign us up for our songs now. You know what I like to drink babe." Nina said to Jesse over her shoulder as she walked over to the DJ. Jesse and I looked at each other and smiled.

"So, let's get some shots in now before Lucille Ball comes back, huh?"

"I'm game," I said.

"Four shots of Jack please!" Jesse yelled to the bartender.

"Four?" I asked.

"Yeah. Two for me, two for you. Think you can handle that?"

"Fuck you, I got this." I slammed the first shot back. Then the second. We both winced as the alcohol burned our throats.

"Alright, alright," said Jesse. "Two Jack and Cokes, and... what is it she likes again?"

"Get her a Bay Breeze."

"Oh right, and a Bay Breeze," Jesse handed over fifty bucks to the bartender and told him to keep the change as we headed over to a small bar table Nina was waiting at. "That's for driving me around, so we're square now, right?"

"Yeah, but you don't have to pay for all of them."

"Nah, don't worry about it."

Nina came over and pinched my cheeks. "Don't tell me your blushing over the sight of me?"

"Stop," I laughed as I brushed her hand away.

She smiled and looked down. "I signed *all* of us up by the way. We just need to wait another twenty minutes, before one of us gets to go. Enough time to work up that courage Andy?"

"Nnnno. No... Well, maybe. How many people are in front of us?"

"Just three more," she said.

People started clapping and the girl in zebra print smiled, and left the stage. A blonde girl in a lime green tube top, and her bashful, yet obviously gay friend went on stage giggling.

"Alright everyone my name is Heather, and this is-"

"Hi, I'm Steve," he waved.

"This is Steven," she chuckled. "Okay, well we are going to be singing... What are we singing again?"

"We're singing 'Your Love is My Drug' by Ke\$ha" Steven said. The music began playing and the two swayed on each other; half for comradery, and half to remain standing. We all started bopping along to the music, and I rolled my eyes at the two clumsy giraffes on stage. Before the song was over, our drinks were down to half melted chunks of ice, so I went up to the bar to grab the next round.

'Your Love is My Drug' ended and the two stumbled off stage. The hazy outline of some other guy went on stage; I can't even recall what he sang. My hands were pressed to the bar and I

stared back at our table. Jesse looked like a stallion looking off into the sunset, gazing at the bright lights of the stage, they were illuminating his eyes just eno-

"What do you want?"

I was startled and looked at the bartender. "Um, can I get two double shots of Jack and Coke, and a Bay Breeze," I handed her my debit card, and tried to keep my hand from shaking as I signed the receipt, and carried the drinks back to our table.

"So who did you put down first, Nina?" Jesse asked.

"Andy boy, of course."

"But I'm hardly even-"

"So what, you're going first," she smiled.

I gulped. I wasn't really ready when I heard the clapping for the last guy.

"Hey, look who upped his game; these are nice and strong," Jesse said taking another sip of his drink.

"Thanks Jess," I started drinking mine faster and faster, and eventually started to cough.

"You okay?" Nina asked.

"Yeah, I'm just warming up," I laughed nervously.

Jesse laughed and hit me on the back as the next girl finished. Wait, there was another girl on stage? And I didn't even... but that mea-

"Alright let's hear it for Sophie," the DJ announced as the crowd clapped. "Next to the stage is Andrew Eh-tru-sio?" he said, stumbling through my last name.

"You forgot to tell them our fake names? C'mon, girl," Jesse said.

"I didn't realize we had to continue the charade inside," she responded as they both shoved me forward. I stood there imagining the audience as oncoming traffic. My shaky hand grabbed the mic stand. "Hi, everyone," my voice cracked, "I'll be singing 'Somewhere Only We Know'," and the rest of that moment was lost to me. I disappeared into the music. I don't remember actually singing, but for some reason I left the stage with tears starting to form in my eyes. Luckily, I hid them as I headed directly to the bathroom.

I looked in the mirror and splashed cold water on my face. "Deep breaths," I told myself. "Deep breaths." I unlatched the lock to the bathroom and opened the door. Nina was standing on the other side. "What are y-" I started.

She put her hand on me and pushed me back inside the bathroom and shut the door behind us. She wrapped her arms around my head and ran her fingers through my hair. Her eyes closed, and her glossy lips puckered. Something in me couldn't stop this. When she came closer, I mirrored her movements and kissed her. Our mouths opened and I felt the ridges of her tongue caress my own as my hands held her by the hips. She was soft. Delicate. And a little bit of an animal. She pulled my hair. I pictured what it would be like to hear her moaning my name in bed. Warm breath against my neck. Sweating, hands sliding down my- Wait, what?

I grabbed her by the arms and pushed her back. I reached for the door but she moved her body against the handle. She looked at me, excited, but a little bit scared.

"Andy," tears were in her eyes, "I've been so unhappy. When I met Jesse at your house, I thought, maybe I wouldn't feel so alone anymore... But I realized we only had one thing in common, you. I stayed with him because I thought I could make you jealous. I thought it was working... But I guess you're just too good of a friend to..."

As I looked at her crinkled face, she was searching for a reply within my own; but what the fuck do you say to something like that? My stomach was turning inside me, bogged down with guilt and whiskey. I felt adrenaline pump inside me.

"I... Nina, just... move out of the way."

"Wait," she pleaded.

But I walked out. I wrapped my arms around my torso and shuffled over to the table with my head down until I looked back up at Jesse whose eyes were a little droopy.

"Just in time, you almost missed my song!" Jesse slurred.

"Jesse I-"

"Hold on," he put his finger up to my lips, still wet with a hint of Nina's saliva, "I'm up."

"And coming to the stage is Jesse D'Marco," crooned the DJ.

He jogged up to the stage as if he were a world class champ entering a boxing ring.

"Heyyyy ev'ry body, I will be singing 'Miserable at Best' for you, my way of... well whatever. The music started and he began: "*Katie, don't cry. I know, you're trying your hardest, and the hardest part is letting go of the nights we shared; Ocala is calling and you know it's*

haunting, but compared to your eyes, nothing shines quite as bright and when we look to the sky, it's not mine, but I want it so-"

"Did you tell him?" Nina asked me.

"No, he went right on stage."

"Let's not pretend like you're alone tonight (I know he's there, and) you're probably hanging out and making eyes (while across the room, he stares). I'll bet he gets the nerve to walk the floor and ask my girl to dance, and she'll say yes-"

"I don't think it matters" Nina said.

"Because these words were never easier for me to say, or her to second guess, but I guess that I can live without you, but without you I'll be miserable at best-"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"You're all that I hoped I'd find In every single way; and everything I could give is everything you couldn't take. Cause nothing feels like home, you're a thousand miles away and the hardest part of living is just taking breaths to stay. Because I know I'm good for something, I just haven't found it yet-"

"Because I didn't sign him up for this song."

"And this will be the first time in a week that I'll talk to you, and I can't speak. It's been three whole days since I've had sleep because I dream of his lips on your cheek and I got the point that I should leave you alone but we both know that I'm not that strong, and I miss the lips

that made me fly-" Nina and I looked at each other in slight bafflement as Jesse left the stage.

"Come on, Drew, let's beat it," he said dragging his feet.

"What?" Nina and I asked in unison.

"I said Andrew and I are leaving now, Nina!"

"Why are we leaving?" Nina asked.

"I didn't include *your name*. Find your own way home tonight."

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"Do you want me to spell it out? We're over! I'll see you later. Wave goodbye to Andy!"

He grabbed me by the arm and we were on our way out of the Dahlia.

"You can't le-, you two a- t- dru-"

I couldn't hear exactly what she said, but it didn't matter because I didn't have a say in the matter. "What's going on?" I asked.

"Get in the car."

"But why are we-"

"Just get in the car!" he said, as I fumbled with the keys and unlocked the doors. Again, the caustic silence momentarily filled the air as we sat down. "I've never really liked her- I mean I liked her, but just as a... 'Not Girlfriend'. Ya know?" he hiccupped. "I don't know what happened when she went into the bathroom with you, I'm guessing a little more than just a conversation?"

I looked down at the mat under my feet.

"Right. It's okay though, man. I'm not mad. Not at you, at least. You didn't do anything wrong. Just get us outta here."

So I got us out of there. Sure it was stupid, we were a little drunk, but my best friend just gave me a free pass. It was time to leave.

The steering wheel laughed as it danced in and out of my grip. I had to close my eyes tight and breathe to realign my vision, then I twisted the key in the ignition. I took one more deep breath. Reversed. Turned the wheel to the left. Shifted into drive. Then pressed down on the accelerator.

What was Nina even talking about? I'm getting too close to the left now. Swerve to the right. And straight away back to the main road. Schizophrenic stripes lined the miles and miles of dimly lit asphalt ahead of us.

"So I just want you to know-"

"Shut up," Jesse said. "I don't care."

"What do you mean you don't care?"

"I just don't. You're still my best friend, asshole."

"But I kissed her back!" I yelled swinging my arms off the steering wheel, jerking the car sideways.

He laughed, "Mhm."

"I did!"

"Whatever, It's not like you liked it," he shrugged.

"I so liked it!" I proclaimed in a slightly confused, yet defensive manner.

He leapt across his seat and grabbed the steering wheel, pulling it to the right. We swerved around a car I didn't notice and we veered off road. My Camaro skidded onto the shoulder as I slammed my brake and stopped the car just before a sign which read "Exit: 67 Fairview," I began panting fervently, but Jesse remained calm.

"You didn't. So drop the act already."

I slowly turned to him. "We almost crashed, and you're still debating whether I liked kissing her?"

"Oh, big deal. We didn't hit anything. And it's not a debate, you didn't. I can tell. I know what you really like."

"Oh really, what's that?"

"This," he said as he grabbed my shirt collar pulling me in close to kiss me. He was right. I could feel the difference in excitement between the two kisses. His lips weren't as rough as I imagined, either. They were soft, and caressed my mouth in a much more tender way than Nina's did.

His hands moved from holding my collar, to pulling the back of my neck and grabbing my waist. I put my hands on his face and let them glide over the stubble of his beard. It was like letting sand slip through my fingers. He bit my bottom lip and I let out a whimper.

"See, I told you. That is a face that enjoyed a kiss," Jesse said. I could feel myself blushing. "Alright now enough of this gay shit, I need you to hold my hand." I was a little confused but I did what he said and gave him my hand. We interlocked fingers and he started squeezing it.

"Jesse, I don't know why I never told you that-"

"Don't worry, you'll never have to explain yourself to me," he paused. "Remember that time back when we were little, and you used to come to my hockey games?"

"Yeah?"

"That one time when you painted your face like a jaguar for my team?"

"Oh my God! Of course I do," I laughed.

"I played terribly, because I had just found out the day before that my parents were getting divorced."

"Yeah, I remember that too..."

"Even though we lost and I played horribly, you said that I did great, and you *meant* it. You brought me some Gushers and slept over my house. We had pizza and watched Power Rangers all night," his eyes started to tear. "And if you're parents kick you out like they did your sister, you can stay with me. We'll stay up all night, and I'll buy you a fucking truck load of Gushers."

"Thanks," I whispered, as tears rolled down my face.

We sat in silence for a few minutes after that until we both fell asleep. I dreamt of what dating Jesse would look like. My dreams borrowed memories of him and me hanging out together, distorting them, putting us together. We were ice skating and he leaned over to pick me off the ground. I threw popcorn at him in the movies and we were laughing. We were at the beach and I was flung over his shoulder as we-

I woke up to the honk of a passing traffic horn at about six in the morning. The sun was blazing down on us through the windows. I looked down and saw Jesse and I were still holding hands. He started to stir so I let go as he woke up.

"Good morning," I said.

"Are we home?" he said as he stretched and yawned.

"No, not yet."

"Well, get on that shit," he smiled, eyes still closed.

I rubbed the crust out of my eyes and pulled back onto the road. I was smiling like an idiot reliving last night. "Do you want to get breakfast?"

"Sure," he said. "By the way, I finished my drawing. Whadaya think?" he asked, as he handed me his drawing. It was a portrait of me looking over at him from the driver seat. There were leaves swirling around my face, stars on top of the page, and the Faireview exit sign in the background. "It's beautiful," I said, understating how radiant it made me feel. I couldn't believe he saw me like this. He studied me as meticulously as I did him.

I stared at him and this newfound vulnerability. My lust for him, my hopes for more than what we were, had dissipated. I understood that he loved me, and that whatever this was, was enough. Our exit was coming up on the right.

"I want to hang it up at The Black Dahlia next time we go back," he said.