

Damn This City

Cat hair still floated about the car's cramped air space from when I first sat down into the backseat. Jacob and Charlie sat motionless in the front seats, ignoring my introduction to the car. It was 31 degrees outside, and for some reason they had the air conditioning working hard to match that. A sharp and disorienting stench slithered its tendrils up my nose. Marijuana, rotten artichoke dip, body odor, and booze, making me all too aware of my situation. The sun hadn't risen yet, and the world was still deep in a pale blue wash. Despite only having received a few hours of sleep and being dog-tired, sleeping seemed an impossibility. The loud oppressive hum of the car as it flew down the road pressed in on my head from every direction. A small Bluetooth speaker rolled back and forth across the dashboard, slamming into either side, and rattling whenever idle. The car's stereo system had been blown out, so this was the source of music.

I wonder what time it is over there. I wonder if she's awake. I wonder if she's texting him rather than me. No, she wouldn't do that. She's honest. Man, I wish I could just talk to her.

The hair on the back of Charlie's head was just as unkempt as always, perfectly matching the rest of his costume. A stained white t-shirt, two sizes too small was tight around his pale belly, draped by an unzipped jacket covered in so much cat hair that it appeared as a mohair jacket. Everything slipped off his figure uncomfortably. His all too large double-knee Dickies pants hung on without a belt, sagging down his butt revealing his underwear, looking so worn you'd have thought they were put through a woodchipper. And I swear he's had those blue denim adidas sneakers since I first met him, four years ago.

"If you're going to play this fucking shit, you don't get to be in charge of the music!"

Jacob snapped at Charlie in an unfair manner.

Charlie had been flapping his hands to the beat of the music, clearly enjoying it. He paused and shook rigidly, almost buzzing as he processed this attack and tried to formulate his response.

Jacob's tan Carhartt work jacket was zipped up to his neck and bunched up in the front. It had begun to annoy him, so he took it off as he made his shot at Charlie, revealing a well-worn wife beater over his pale skin. His massive black cargo pants and Timberland work boots were covered in mud and paint, just like the floor of the car. Jacob threw his jacket to the backseat onto my lap. So that's where the body is coming from. I quickly wrapped it up and stuffed it under all the backpacks full of cameras and toiletries. Jacob held the wheel at 10 & 2, revealing the dark black ink of his tattoos against his freckled Irish heritage. A Revolutionary War era "Join or Die" snake creeping down and around his right tricep to the top of his forearm, a giant "The United States of America" across his back in a cowboy font, and the words "White" and "Power" on the insides of his biceps.

"Goddamn it is hot in here." Within in the arctic climate of this mobile ice chest, Jacob had grown a little toasty and decided to shed his layers, finally ripping off his beanie to reveal the best part of all: one completely shaven, bald head.

What have I gotten myself into? Why didn't I ask to meet this guy before agreeing to help? As long as I live, till the end of my days, I will never again listen to Charlie's judgement of someone's character... Oh well, don't judge. He could be a cool guy.

"I- I- I'm alright with this not necessarily being your favorite music. You simply lack the perspective and the context needed to understand how this is probably the most underappreciated and complex musical composition being released today." Charlie had an endearing way of

tripping over his own words as he tried to spin together sophisticated sentences while attempting to sound smart. He was smart. He shouldn't try formulating his sentences so much.

"I'm sorry Charlie, but I'm going to have to agree with Jacob on this one. I can't listen to Smash Bros. soundtrack music for ten hours. I know you have good music, just play something we'll all like." I tried to put it as kindly as I possibly could, since I actually felt like punching him in the back of the head.

"Ok, ok, alright. I won't fight you guys, this is not a hill I'm going to die on, I'm just saying that you're missing out." Say what you will about Charlie, how messy he is, how difficult he can be sometimes, he always admitted when he was wrong and bowed his head, even when he maybe shouldn't. He changed the music to exactly what I knew he was going to change it to; Elliott Smith. "Son of Sam" immediately came rattling out of the small plastic speaker rolling back and forth across the dashboard.

"Hey, have you guys eaten yet?" I was so hungry, I was beyond hungry, and I had forgotten my protein shake on the kitchen counter right next to the door.

"No, we actually haven't. What I was thinking was we'd make it down to Mesquite, maybe Vegas before we pull over for food." Jacob said it so matter-of-factly, which might have kept others from objecting, but not me, and not now.

"I am so sorry, but I came straight out to the car without having eaten assuming you guys were the same, and I don't think I'll make it that long." I really wanted to tell him to turn around and drop me off back at home because I was starting to realize the pile of shit that this weekend was going to be. It wasn't going to be a little getaway to sunny San Diego from the cold Utah winter, it wasn't going to clear my mind, or keep it from focusing on her at all. No part of this

trip had pleasure written into it. In fact, this lack of any enjoyment whatsoever has kept her prancing around in my mind even more than she was before.

“Ehhhh, yeah. Sure. I guess we can get food. What were you thinking?”

“I’m not quite sure, I can look.”

“I’ll take us to either of the first Taco Bell or McDonald’s that I see.”

“If I eat that, my stomach will crawl out of my body, reject me as its host, and never forgive me.”

“Alright then, well? What will it be?”

“We could just go to Beto’s.” Charlie, like an exalted little angel that had been sitting idly by, completely redeemed himself of the horrible music he had been playing.

“Yeah, let’s get Beto’s.” I quickly jumped onto that idea, knowing we weren’t going to get anything better, and accepting the idea of a big greasy burrito.

“Alright. Take me there.”

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It was the grimmest burrito I had ever had, being eaten in the back of the grimmest car I had ever been in, and it was delicious. As we ate, Jacob kept driving. He had now gotten onto the highway. We had officially begun our trek. I was only concerned with seeing how quickly I could inhale this food. I was holding a tiny cup of salsa verde in one hand and the burrito in the other-

The car leapt to the side so quickly that I was certain Jacob would lose control. Someone up ahead had been in the right lane and decided to pass the person in front of them by getting into the left lane. This had obstructed Jacob’s clear path as he flew through the left lane. Instead of slowing down, he yanked the wheel over to the right, accelerated, and yanked it back to the left. It was only then that I realized he had his cruise control set at 100 mph.

“Dumb fucking nigger!”

Jacob had now steadied himself in the left lane again only to speed up to 110 mph, looking back at the stranger in their car with pinched brows and a poisonous glare. I had spilled a bit of salsa and contents of my burrito across the floor of the car, unable and unwilling to clean it up.

She would urge me to not comply. She would tell me that I should say something. She would say something.

But there was no possibility for change. This man with a burrito in one hand, and our lives in the other, who was hurling down the highway with no real reason for the speed, in a car whose wheels sounded like they could fly off at any given moment, was incapable of change. He was cemented in his aversion towards everyone and everything that wasn't him. To voice any kind of opinion would only be an invitation for a debate. One in which he will never be wrong, and I will always be uninformed.

I finished my food, placed the trash in a bag, and resituated the backpacks in a way that allowed me to somewhat lay across the seat with hopes of sleep. I placed a hat over my eyes and a hood over my ears, trying my hardest to drown out Jacob and Charlie's discussion on whether or not women should have the right to vote.

I hate this person. I hate his hate. I cannot think of anyone more detestable. I cannot think of anyone I'd rather be with less.

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There is no more miserable awakening than the kind that happens when you're barely sleeping uncomfortably in the back of a moving deathtrap, and the driver decides to play skinhead punk music at full volume. The only words I could make out were in the chorus when it

chanted “Only Aryan blood!” I lunged forward in response to this violent alarm, wincing at the bright sunlight that was now overhead. We were in-between Mesquite and Las Vegas, one long stretch of ugly. At least I had slept a chunk of the drive away.

I picked up my phone, hoping for an alert to distract me. Praying for a notification from a very specific person.

It's 4 am in Japan so she's asleep, but still no text? What if she is texting him? No. She wouldn't. She said she'd let me know when she gets back. Also, he's just a friend. She has tons of friends. Stop assuming the worst. We'll see each other when she gets back. We'll talk. This is so weird though. Is this really how it's going to end?

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When we arrived, we parked in the lot just next to Belmont Park. We followed the rave music to the beach where we immediately went to the water and started walking north. Apparently, it was still spring break for some. Girls and guys, all wearing too little fabric, holding too many drinks, stumbled their way up and down the boardwalk laughing wildly while peacocking. Family pods underneath umbrellas were draped on top of beach towels, peppering the beach, all playing in the sand and enjoying their sunset.

I could drive to her house right now. After all it's been a few years. Her dad would probably pull out his portable pizza oven that she gave him for Father's Day and make a pizza as we would reminisce on the crazy story that is how we first met. OR I could go visit one of my many cousins that live down here. I'm finally here, and I'm still stuck thinking about her. I grew up coming here and I have a lifetime of memories attached to this place, and yet it's the memory of her that's now attached to this city and takes the spotlight within my mind. I wish I could erase her. I wish I could go full Kate Winslet and erase her from my memory. Just for now at least.

“Is there somewhere we can go where there’s less of... them?” Jacob surveyed the area and its racially diverse inhabitants as if they were the enemy. He had a permanent scowl painted on underneath his aviator sunglasses as we continued up the beach. I was embarrassed to be seen with his bald head and cargo pants. Hopefully people didn’t associate me with him. Charlie was finally free to jump and splash about in the frigid, foamy water. I walked on the line between the dry sand and the ocean, holding my camera as well as my tongue.

Damn this city. How did I think that I would get her off my mind by coming to her home? By coming to the where I met her. Man, I’m stupid. It’s ok. It’ll all be ok. She just needs to get home.

As we continued north, we passed the awkward-looking castle building, “Hamel’s,” we passed the house my family stayed in for a Thanksgiving family reunion so many years ago, and finally came to a place that they were satisfied with. We sat down in the sticky sand and watched the sun disappear, searching for a green flash. As the temperature dropped, we started to make our way back to the car. Jacob would make a few bigoted remarks while Charlie laughed the way he would laugh if anyone said something. I hung back and enjoyed the remaining bits of the blazing sunset and the beach scenery through the viewfinder of my camera.

That night I slept like a dead man.

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The next morning came much too quick. Still, no notification.

The man we were to interview arrived exactly on time. He was a kind, but serious man. He talked about his experiences in Iraq. He detailed his life as a prison guard in the California state correctional system. Jacob asked him questions about the race gangs within the prison, and I’m sure he misconstrued things the man said as even more support for his myopic mindset.

Charlie sat back on the couch, doing nothing really. The interview went well. The man was put together, well read, and charismatic. The interview lasted about four hours. Through the whole interview, I paced from camera to camera making sure everything was ok, during which my phone received not one text message. Cameras back in their cases, lights put away, stands folded down, and furniture reset, we headed back out for the beach.

“You know this place better than either of us. Where should we go?” They looked to me as their guide.

“We could go to Sunset Cliffs. They’ve got food over there and if we go up to Ocean Beach and then we could go to the tide pools.”

“Let’s do it.” They were both too excited for this suggestion.

Damn it. Why did I say that? We could have gone to Coronado, we could have gone to La Jolla, Del Mar, we could have gone anywhere, and I suggest Sunset Cliffs. I couldn’t be more stupid. Am I trying to shoot myself in the foot? Why the Freudian slip now?”

We drove to Point Loma in complete silence in the perfect weather this sunny day had given us. A thick and deep melancholia had settled right on top of me as I knew where we were going. The weather did not represent my feelings, that’s for sure.

We passed her house.

We passed her school.

We passed that goddamn smoothie place that she loves.

We passed the Ralphs where we bought the laxatives that we used to spike my friends ice cream that night so many years ago.

End me now. Take me away from Earth, just end me now.

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They decided where to eat, and after a deliciously spicy but greasy hamburger, some meandering down to Ocean Beach and over to the tide pools, I found myself sitting on the exact same ledge we had been sitting on when I first got to know her. The exact same spot where I took photos of my friends with her and the sunset. The exact same cliff where she and I made a marriage pact, that if we were both single by the age of 35, we'd marry each other. It had been five years. Five years of being misled. Five years of being her source of validation. Five years of being one of her benchwarmers.

I so desperately wanted to call her, to text her, to understand what was happening. It couldn't just fizzle out. After all this time, it couldn't end with a slow and confusing halt to our communication. In my eyes, this weekend was entirely to escape. Instead, I had ended up at the one place on earth where these thoughts were inescapable.

I called my friend Boston who knew her and the situation well.

"Dude, I should've listened to you. You were right. Slimy. She's slimy. I just wish I could call her." I paced back and forth along the pools.

"Maybe you should. It's been a long time. It's past the point of giving her time and space. I think you should call her." Boston was always fair. He called me out when I needed to be called out. He told me the truth when I needed it.

"I don't know man. I want to call her, but I also want to never talk to her again. How should I call her?"

"What do you mean?"

"Do I act casual like nothing's happened? Do I say what I'm thinking and feeling? Do I ask her to hang out? What should I do?"

“Start out casual, play it cool. Pretend you haven’t thought about anything. Play it by ear.”

Play it by ear. I’m always playing by ear.

“You don’t think I should just go for it? Just throw down, and be like ‘yo, what’s going on?’”

“Hmm, no. Don’t do that. Just let her lead. See what she does and where it goes and then follow her. If she brings things up then you do to, but if she acts cool then you act cool.”

“If she picks up and acts like nothing’s happened, I think I might dive off these cliffs into the water and never come back up.”

“You’ll be fine. Just call her and let her lead. Play it by ear.”

“Alright. I’ll call her. How are you and Sydney?”

“I’ll tell you about that later. You call her and then call me back.”

“Alright bye.”

Maybe she’s been waiting this whole time. Maybe it was simply miscommunication. I don’t know how she’d explain all the time she’d spent with him, but I trusted her.

“HEY! Dude! Get off the phone and hang out!” Jacob was fully agitated with how I had been entirely elsewhere since the interview. Part of me understood, part of me agreed, but almost all of me didn’t care. This was my priority, not protecting his pasty white scalp from the sun and cat calling girls.

I now had a new path. I was to call her, remain casual, and see where it goes. “Play it by ear.” That was the game plan, and I intended to do as much. Charlie jumped off a ledge maybe two feet out of the water and somehow managed to bash his leg and start bleeding all over. We decided to leave and go to Del Mar, but not before Charlie had the chance to stub his toe

resulting in more blood from a ripped off toenail as well as slip onto his back right into the water just after having gotten fully dressed. I couldn't help but laugh to myself at Charlie's misfortune as it seemed to follow him wherever he went. Bandaging his wounds was the last thing on his mind, he took it like a champ. One skinhead, one desperate loser, and one sopping-wet, sandy, and bloodied man-child drove to their new location.

I don't know if I can call her. If she wanted to talk to me, she would have. Her silence must mean something. If she picks up and acts like nothing's happened, I think I'll melt away into the ocean. Is this all even worth it? Yes! You love her! You think you love her? AHHH!!

Sea Grove and Powerhouse Park were perfectly charming as usual. We walked down to the beach and declared our spot upon a rock. Charlie went and resumed his prancing in the water while Jacob watched like a man would watch his dog, and I sat guard over our possessions.

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Some time went by, and there I was. Alone. Now able to call her. It had been two weeks since I'd spoken to her. Two weeks of unexplained silence after nine months of dating, and years of friendship. It was 6:45 pm, 10:45 am in Japan. She had to be awake. I pulled out my phone and pulled up her contact. My heart started to burn and lunged up into my throat. It suddenly became real. I started to sweat. I stood up and started pacing. I forced myself to click on the "call" button and heard the dial tone.

Voicemail. She sent me straight to voicemail.

WHAT?! What did I do?! Did she do that? It's fine. She'll reach out.

I sat back down, partially relieved that the call was avoided, partially brokenhearted and confused at what was happening. The sand between these mossy rocks I sat upon was much

grittier than the other sand. The sky had just started to dip into the yellowish orange as the sun closed in on the horizon.

My phone began to ring. It was her.

Shit! Do I pick it up? No! Relax. Play it by ear, just play it by ear.

I answered the call as if the planning helped at all. It didn't.

"Hi!" She jumped right in with complete enthusiasm.

"Hey. What's up?" I am the epitome of equanimity, the paragon of poise, the zenith of zen. I am sure to sound completely relaxed, even though she has always been able to see right through me.

"Oh nothing, just at a Fresh Market right now. What about you?" If she's acting cool for this conversation as well, then she's winning.

"Nothing really, just at the beach. They have Fresh Markets in Japan?"

"That's fun! No, I'm back from Japan, I'm up in Park City right now."

What the hell? She's back? And she didn't tell me?

"Oh, you're home?"

"Yeah I've been home for like four or five days now."

Five days?

"Cool! What're you doing up in Park City?"

"I'm just up here house shopping with some friends, and then we came to this fresh market to grab some food. We have been here for SO long. It's actually hilarious."

Don't ask what friend it is. You don't need to know. You don't want to know. Why are we talking as if nothing has happened?! We were in a relationship, and now we're acting like we're not?

“Oh, that’s fun! Anyways... it’s been a minute since I’ve heard from you.”

“I know.” She replies the way you would if your grandma had said she hadn’t heard from you.

“How was Japan?”

“It was amazing.”

“Well... you’ll have to tell me about it sometime.” My palms were clammed up, my phone was becoming slippery. Suddenly, I had the feeling that none of my clothes were on right, everything felt awkward and uncomfortable.

“I’ve got to give you the debrief.”

She’s being noncommittal. She’s dodging. She’s evading.

“You’ll have to. Well... what friend are you with anyways?”

DAMN IT WHAT AM I DOING?!

“Oh, just the Christensen’s, so Brad, Angie and all their boys, Nate, *Nick*, and Ben.”

Fuck me. Just make this end. God just end this call. You’re house shopping with another guy and his family? What?! First the dog park, then family dinners, now house shopping? Are you dating him, or me?

“Oh cool! That’s fun! Aren’t they the ones who just bought a house in Lake Como and were inviting you?”

“Yeah, that’s them. They’re getting a place here in Park City too now I guess.”

“Well, that’s cool!”

“Yeah.”

“Ok. Cool! Well, have fun up in Park City!”

“Thank you, I will.”

“Okay, see you.”

“Bye.”

I sat back down on the mossy rocks, heavier than ever before. Every suspicion, all the overthinking, was all correct. She was with him. Apparently, the song is right; never trust a girl who says she just has a friend. The surf was perfect, and the clouds were on fire. I stared at the water for a few minutes, sitting in a tainted heaven.

Off to my right, a crowd at a restaurant erupted into celebration, singing “happy birthday.” I looked from the party back to the sunset, my eyes wandered around and I looked to my left, down the opposite direction of the beach. A man with a camera was sitting down on the sand behind a rock, taking pictures of a man dropping down to one knee and proposing to his now fiancée.

Man. I am IN a movie.

I sat there motionless and watched the sun set, wrestling to untangle my mind. I had no idea what any of this meant, or where anything was going to go.

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We later ended up deciding to drive back through the night. I got the back seat again; except this time, I wasn't slow in the head. My heart wanted to sleep, but my mind flew at lightspeed as I foolishly decided to listen to all the music she'd ever sent me, all in the name of exploring this sadness. Jacob bobbed and weaved through traffic in the dark all the way home, shouting out racial epithets and discussing with Charlie how dinosaurs never actually existed.

“Hey! You care where we get food?” Jacob yelled back to me.

I don't care. We can crash and burn, as far as I'm concerned. I don't care.