

Insomniatic

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The year I turned twelve, I could count my birthday gifts on one hand. Shelby bought me a hardcover copy of *Breaking Dawn*, and Jessica got me a Team Jacob t-shirt—a combo gift, of sorts. My dad wrote a letter riddled with spelling errors and gave me two hundred dollars. And you, you gave me *Insomniatic*. The CD was two years old, but it was the most recent piece of music released by Aly & AJ. They called themselves twins born three years apart, and we called ourselves sisters, though we were much more and less than that.

Potential Breakup Song

After my dad died, adults got into the habit of buying me ice cream. Aunt Nora bought me ice cream in big pink cups from the Baskin Robbins drive-thru on the way home from therapy sessions. Grandma brought back gallon buckets of vanilla, pressing her gnarled old finger to her lips like we could keep this a secret from the whole house. Marti and I even stopped by Dairy Barn after church, some Sundays. Adults buy kids ice cream when they feel bad for them is what I'm trying to tell you here.

So, in a way, I almost felt worse when your mom asked if I wanted to go to Culvers with her.

We were fourteen that year, the year the Culvers was new in Marquette. In any town with a population under fifty thousand in a tax bracket that thinks twenty is a splurge, the opening of a new fast food joint was a pretty big deal.

We made the nearly thirty-minute drive from their house in the middle of the woods to the tiny strip of downtown that Marquette laid claim to in almost complete silence. You weren't there to blast Justin Bieber, and she wasn't

my mom, though God knows she was trying to be. We got mediums because I was too polite to order large but I felt too goddamn bad for myself to get small.

“How is your relationship with God?” Aunt Leanne asked, the words kind but stilted, like I was a stranger. For the purposes of this story, me the pathetic orphan who was being pitied, I ought to have been small and skinny, barely picking at the melting dairy, but I wasn’t good at playing my part.

“I go to church,” I said. “I struggle with my faith sometimes.”

I was an atheist, of course, but she had just bought me ice cream.

Leanne nodded.

“This is just a phase she’s going through, I think,” she said. “Of course, we knew the day would come when she got boy crazy, but... don’t worry, sweetie. I’ll talk to her.”

“Don’t!” I pleaded. “Really, it’s fine.”

“It’s rude,” Leanne said. “You come all this way, and then...”

“It’s fine, I get it,” I said. “It’s fine, really. I’ve been messaging Shelby back at the house. Besides, we’ll be up all night anyway. We talked about this,” we hadn’t, “and I don’t mind. I really, really don’t mind.”

You don’t need me to tell you I did mind, right?

You got home just before sunset, a shine in your eyes that told me what you did before you said it with your mouth. You told your parents we were going on a walk, and as soon as we were down the driveway, you had whipped out your iPod touch and hit play on “I Just Had Sex,” (The Lonely Island ft. Akon)

You raised your plucked eyebrows at me.

“How did it happen?” I asked, too bored for you.

“We took a beach towel into the woods,” she said. “It was

beautiful.”

Getting fucked by your boyfriend of six months on a beach towel in the woods didn’t sound beautiful to me; it sounded like the ground would hurt your back and that there would be a danger of mosquito bites where a person really wouldn’t want mosquito bites.

We did walk our usual lap. Up East White Bear, then White Bear, all the way to 510, down to the old bridge, and up the hill to the new bridge. Back down 510, past the yellow ragweed that smelled like pollen and the color of sunsets and August, it always smelled like August and Michigan and you. Somewhere back on White Bear drive, you admit that it hurt a little.

“But it was amazing,” you say. “Like, I don’t know, it wasn’t that fun, I guess, but I’ve done it, you know?”

We stayed up late talking, just like I promised my aunt, your mom. By one in the morning, when your parents were still watching Monk in the living room, the glimmer in your eyes was less exhilaration and more fear. After you showered, it was worse.

“It still hurts,” you say. “And now—now I’m, like, bleeding down there? Is that supposed to happen?”

“Let’s Google it—”

“No! Are you insane, what if my parents see?!”

“They won’t see on my iPod—”

“What if you can check, somehow? It’s their WiFi! They can’t know, they can’t! Am I dying?”

“You’re not dying, maybe it was just—I don’t know, too big? Is it your period?”

“Not for two weeks!”

We spoke in whispers, your chest shaking. Years later, someone said you either get scared before or after your first time, but I didn’t think you ever got scared.

“Can you just—can you just get me a bag of frozen peas?”

Go out to the freezer and sneak the peas back here, I just have to put something down there it hurts so bad it hurts.”

“What if your parents see me carrying a bag of frozen peas? What do I say?”

“Please!”

I snuck the peas out of the freezer, hidden under my shirt while your dad asked how my day had been. You clamped them between your thighs, and asked me to sleep with you, just tonight.

We were too big to share a twin bed—or, I was too big to share a twin bed, but you curled up against my side and said I just can’t sleep alone tonight, I can’t be alone, I can’t. And after all the lights were off and the glowing dials of the clock said it was well past four, you whispered what if I go to hell? And I pretended to be asleep.

Bullseye

Illinois farms could grow strawberries, with a lot of dedication and pesticide, but in general, berries grew up North, where you lived. All berries, especially blueberries. I didn’t really like blueberries, but I soon discovered blueberry picking was fun.

Everything that far north in Michigan was rusty, the sun always hugging the horizon and bleeding the sky orange. The commerce there was all about iron, and the landscape was like a mirror of the economy. The scraggly bushes of blueberries, rowed right up to the faded red horizon were black, like twisted metal. The roads were warm too, earth that looked nothing like the brown dirt of the farmland I called home.

The adults were busy, and you pointed off into the hazy sunset, voice low and husky, like we were telling scary stories.

“There’s a big, abandoned house out that way,” you said. “The kids at youth group say it’s haunted, and no one’s been in there for years. They say some teenagers from Ishpeming

went in there last year, and one of them went missing the next week.”

“I didn’t hear that,” Meagan said. Meagan was older, but she looked like me. You were already too cool for her, but we were 12, young enough that older meant something to us.

“It’s true!” you said. “There’s an abandoned house down there.”

“That wasn’t what I said wasn’t true...” Meagan said. I wasn’t listening. I had started walking down the road, blueberry bucket abandoned by the shoulder.

“HEY!”

You were a runner, and you slammed your hand down on my shoulder in a second. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“You said there’s an abandoned house,” I said. “I wanna see it.”

The grownups were long gone, would be for a while.

“That’s dangerous,” you said.

“So?” I asked. “It’s abandoned. The sun’s out. What’s the worst that could happen?”

“I’m not coming.”

“I don’t care.”

I started walking anyway. You grabbed my hand, and I shook it off. I was already angry, but I don’t remember why, not anymore. You grabbed my hand harder, and I pulled away with more force.

“That’s enough!” you shouted. You took my arm and dragged, too strong for me to pull away. I tried to shake you off and fell, and you kept dragging. Rusty, iron-orange dust coated me, and I screamed and thrashed. I was having a tantrum all of a sudden, and you were pulling me back to the buckets, hand on my wrist like metal.

I don’t know how long this went on. I was stubborn, stupid stubborn, maybe even stubborn enough to try again, once or four times, but it ended with me sitting in the

brambles and holding back tears, hands clenched around thorns to feel something, anything.

“You’re not her mom!” Meagan shouted.

You’re not my mom, I thought again, savage.

You started crying before I did.

You said “Well, somebody has to be!”

Closure

The year after you dropped out of college, you didn’t want to take me back to the train station.

“You don’t mind, do you?” you asked, knowing I did, voice all syrupy sweet. You’ve got this tone of voice I only ever heard you use on me, like you’re talking to a kindergartener. It’s okay sweetie everything’s fine.

“It’s just, you know, Zach and I were going to go up to the falls. He got some more stuff, good shit, Girl Scout Cookie, have you ever tried Girl Scout Cookie? Makes you real mellow. And we’ve got work tomorrow, so you understand, right? I mean, we’d just be stuck in a car together for six hours.”

“Yeah, I understand.”

Earlier, when you thought I was still asleep, I heard you and your mom shouting at each other. “Don’t you feel bad for her?” “Of course I feel bad for her!”

Of course, you feel bad for me.

Division

We fell apart during high school. It didn’t happen overnight; we never imploded on ourselves, we just drifted. I thought I cared about it more than you, but now it’s harder to say, so far removed.

I still came over every summer, walking barefoot in the woods and idly picking raspberries off the bushes that grew on the sides of the road, riding right behind you the year you got a four wheeler and reading quietly in your old bedroom while you went out with friends. This year, though, the girl

up on the rotating cast of best friends was nicer, calmer. Still a popular girl, a skinny blond with a secret love of One Direction and a not so secret love of gossip and being a popular girl.

But Hunter didn't look at me like something that had crawled out of the sewer, and more than that, she went out of her way to include me when you and her hung out. She was sweet.

She wasn't there that night, though, the night you went out to the backyard and made a fire while I watched, soft, city hands useless in my lap. You dragged the logs over and lit the kindling beneath them and sat on the hammock across from me, knees tucked under your chin.

We didn't talk about anything with substance anymore. We smiled politely and made believe we were friends the way we used to make believe we were witches, mermaids, superheroes.

Like it or Leave it

You promised you would take me cliff diving, told me over and over how amazing it was. I sort of expected it would be an activity for you and me, not you and me and your boyfriend and his sister, but there we were, an unhappy little family hiking through the beautiful woods. You crumpled up an empty can of Arizona Iced Tea and threw it into the trees.

When we got to the precipice I realized that the water was an awfully long way down. I said I would just go down and swim, check how deep it was first. Zach gave me an odd look, but no one else responded. I asked how deep it was, and was told it was deep enough. Zach took off his shirt, set down his lighter and baggie full of weed, and with a Tarzan-whoop, he threw himself over the edge. Kowa-fuckin-bunga, there was silence at last.

Zach climbed back up the cliff to us again. He was

dripping and smirking, and everything about him disgusted me in that moment.

“You ladies too scared?” he asked.

And oh, I hated him, and were you not in love with him, you would have despised him too. Unfortunately.

“Shut up, Zach!” you said, a whiny, valley girl temporarily possessing you and wringing out her voice through your mouth. You giggled. Zach jumped again. He climbed back up and made fun of us some more and there we were, trapped in limbo, you being such a girl and him being such a boy.

“I’m fine with just going home now,” Zach said, leaning back. He flicked your American Spirits one by one into the water, letting them float on top like so much foul-smelling flotsam. “I’ve jumped twice. I’m good. If you ladies—”

“Shut up, Zach,” I said, and I took a running leap and threw myself over the edge of the cliff.

A glorious fall. A cold crash. At least I couldn’t hear either of you while I was underwater.

Like Whoa

The first time I saw you I was hiding behind a long, low, planter. You flailed out of the car and declared to the big, empty air: “My legs feel like noodles!”

I stepped out from behind the planter, and we fell in step with one another instantly.

Did I like Pokeman? No.

Did you like Harry Potter? Absolutely not.

Did we like Narnia? Oh, yes, we liked Narnia. We liked the Jonas Brothers, and Disney Channel, and Aly & AJ, and mysterious stories about little girls who could do magic. I told your dad where to find my dad, and took your hand in mind. Not clammy, not sweaty, just smooth and perfectly suited to mine.

I know sometimes writing to you feels like a love story,

and that's because it is one. Some love stories just have nothing to do with romance, nothing to do with sex. And you and I had everything to do with Love.

Insomniatic

We were up together all night, every night. In person, on the phone, I forgot how to sleep around you, because there weren't enough hours in the day.

Silence

We stayed on the trampoline till well past two in the morning. You and I, we didn't really believe in normal hours of sleeping and waking. My mom always fought to wake me up in the mornings, and after she died, my dad gave up. So long as I caught the bus to school on weekdays, he didn't really care. That summer, the best and the worst summer, we stayed up till five every morning and slept till two every afternoon. We jumped on the trampoline, took turns playing Neopets on my dad's big desktop computer, and watched Teen Titans on my tiny TV in the basement. Aside from this, life was just one big car ride from the hospital to the house to hospice to the house to "please can we go to the mall please" to the house to the hospital to the house.

Dad was dying and I didn't get to say goodbye to anyone that summer. I gave you lice and you killed my fish and aside from sitting crammed into the same leather computer chair as you, skinny twelve-year-old knees bumping together, it was a four-month blur of misery.

I had a silver and blue CD player-slash-radio and one CD, so when our legs burned from hours of jumping on the trampoline and our eyes burned from hours of staring at the computer, we lay on my scratchy pink bedspread that still smelled like cedar and mothballs, and we listened to *Insomniatic* over and over again. You thought the title track was the best, I liked *Silence*.

I think it was the morning we caught *Death Note* on

Adult Swim. Late night Cartoon Network played grown up cartoons, and we both liked blood and death, you because you were sheltered and I because what was the other choice?

We were the last ones up when the phone rang. And we were twelve, not stupid. Phones don't ring at four in the morning.

I must have said hello, but I don't really remember speaking. The lady on the phone asked for Bill Mackey, and we ran upstairs, bare feet on the concrete of the unfinished basement. You shook Uncle Bill awake, and I handed him the phone.

The summer came in flashes, see, little glimpses. Watching episodes of Teen Titans on YouTube that came in three parts because videos had to be under ten minutes, we watched in the computer room at the hospital down the hall from his room. The lights were always off in there. Joe feeding Dad tomato soup through a straw and crying, saying "Please eat something." Nora with her hands on my shoulders promising I would get to see you all the time, and me saying "He might not die. He could get better." Jumping so high on the trampoline I thought we would clear the safety netting. Playing tag in the Walmart at nine at night, getting told to hush now. Introducing you to my friends at Turtle Run, the local pool where everyone else was spending their summer. Dad talking less and less in increments so slow that I never knew what the very last thing he said was. The heavy, indigo scent of Britney Spears perfume we doused everything in. The overwhelming weight of knowing it was you and me against the world.

We stood shoulder to shoulder, the exact same height, in fuzzy bathrobes, staring at Bill as he nodded, closed his eyes, said "Okay" into the receiver. He hung up and started talking to Joe, like we weren't there.

"Hey," you said. "What is it? What happened?"

He looked at me, and he didn't even look sad.

"I'm sorry, sweetie. He's gone."

Of course, we knew that, but we had to hear it.

"Go to bed now, chickies," your mom said. She was the only one crying, and we walked back down the stairs, one cold step at a time.

I didn't cry. I didn't feel that sad, but I didn't feel tired anymore either. At first I felt nothing, and then I felt relief.

We sat in front of the fuzzy TV until the sun came up, one episode of Teen Titans melting into the next. You didn't say anything, and neither did I. We didn't hug or cry. You didn't try to tell me it was okay and I didn't fall apart. You stayed up all night with me.

If I Could Have You Back

You were, of course, invited to the wedding. You were my sister as far as I was concerned, so of course you were invited.

It would not have been so bad if you hadn't said you would come.

Flattery

We used to talk about what it would be like when we were really sisters. I shouldn't have looked forward to my dad dying, but when we talked about our life sharing a big basement bedroom, living in Marquette, a neverending sleepover, it was hard not to be a little excited.

I spent years feeling bad for staying with a different set of relatives. I hadn't wanted to offend you, but maybe it was for the best.

I'm Here

Sometimes I think it was my fault. I told you it was okay that you didn't want to go away to college, but when I said that, something snapped in you, I watched it.

"I'm going to die here," you said, and you started to cry.

We were sitting by the fire, like we always did, because

that was our place. You were fire I was water you were earth and I was air and we found the meeting place of all of them outside by the fire pit. Your eyes glistened with flames.

“I’m going to die here!”

You screamed the second time. You were so afraid of getting stuck, so afraid of never leaving, and I didn’t know what to tell you, because I agreed. You probably were. You probably are.

You still live there, and God, I hope you’re happier now than you were then.