

## PERSONAL STRANGER

by  
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You think you know yourself. But you don't.

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The knock on the door was startling. There I was, spread on the couch like hot caramel, partially conscious of the Wednesday morning news program on the television -- but not watching it -- when a loud banging at my door sent me leaping to my feet. I knocked a half-full (well, given the circumstances, half-empty) bottle of beer all over the coffee table. I stood there for a moment, confused. Had I been sleeping again? I looked at the couch from which I just leapt. I knew I slept there last night, but that was all I knew. I did not know who was at the door. I did not know what time it was.

The banging struck again. "Who is it?" I asked, apprehensively.

"It's the police. Please open the door, Mr. Cunningham." The police? Still confused, hungover, tired, I stumbled to the door and opened it. A large District of Columbia police officer -- roughly 6' 4" with a massive frame that was bulging through his uniform -- was staring down at me. His glare was so intimidating that I did not notice his hand on his weapon, and I did not notice the second officer standing directly behind him.

"Mr. Albert Cunningham?" he asked. Demanded, actually.

"Yes," I said. I felt my subconscious shift from a state of confusion as to why these officers were at my door to a state of semi-understanding. I began to feel as if they came to deliver something that I deserved, but I was not sure what. In those fleeting moments before Officer Roland's next sentence, those seconds when I noticed the hand gripping the 45 mm, I heard my subconscious whisper to my conscious these words: *poetic justice*. And I heard Katy Couric say, "isn't that a shame?"

"Mr. Cunningham, you are under arrest. Please turn around and place your hands behind your head. You have the right to remain. . ."

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I'd been arrested once before. I was 16. Possession of narcotics; marijuana to be specific. I was in high school and I had smoked pot a few times before, mostly at parties. It was the early Eighties and the drug culture was supposedly a thing of the past, but most of the kids I knew in my mid-sized Ohio town smoked pot or consumed some other illicit substance. Unlike many friends (and my older, unreliable brother), I was not a big user. In fact, the first time I ever purchased drugs was the time I got arrested, and I was purchasing for my mother!

It was the fall of my junior year, and my mother had a new boyfriend. He was a doctor who worked at the Cleveland Clinic. There was a debate over legalizing marijuana for medicinal uses at the time, and this doctor was unsure where he stood on the issue. He had never smoked pot, but had seen all the research about it. He decided that he should try it. In fact, I think my mother was instrumental in convincing him that he *must* try it in order to make a truly informed decision.

Of course, this well-to-do doctor had no idea where to buy marijuana. So my mother approached me to see if I could find some. Apparently she knew I had smoked in the past -- maybe she thought I smoked more than I actually did -- and it did not bother her. I assume that she approached me because, even though I was only 16, I was more reliable than my 19 year old brother. She gave me \$25, which in those days was too much.

Finding marijuana to purchase was not a problem. I bought it from Richie, a kid in my Spanish class. Richie was a known drug user and a self-described loner. I approached him after Spanish class. I expected him to be a tough as and to adopt a "what-do-I-need-to-sell-to-a-geek-for?" attitude. But he was cool about it. He said sure and to meet him in the parking lot after school the next day.

I still remember Richie turning away and walking down the hall. I remember feeling a sense of great accomplishment, like I had just done something really good, or gotten away with something really bad.

The next day, I met Richie at his dirty red pick up truck. In a matter of moments, I exchanged \$15 for an eighth of dope stored in a black 35 mm film role case. Driving home, I remember being paranoid, as if every car behind me was an under cover police car. I watched the rear view mirror more than the road. There were no cops. When my mother got home from work, I gave her the dope (but not her change).

Though unrelated to the ensuing arrest, the role of my brother's bong in this story always makes it more lighthearted when told at family get togethers. The doctor did not want to hurt his lungs, so my mother asked if I had a water bong. I did not, but I knew where my brother stashed his. I retrieved his dirty old bong, which my mother thought was "absolutely disgusting." She washed all the pieces and left them on a towel on the counter.

When my brother, who attended a small college in town, came home that day, I was sitting in the kitchen. He saw his bong threw a fit. "What are you doing?" he screamed in a whisper. "Why is this here? Mom's gonna see it! What are you, and idiot?"

I could never resist opportunities to torment my brother, particularly because they were so infrequent. "Mom was looking for something to bring lemonade to your football games, so I told her I had this three-foot tumbler that would hold a lot and keep it cool. I wanted to make sure it was clean." A dumb story, but my dumb brother bought it.

He panicked and reassembled the bong. He heard my mother coming down the stairs and stuffed it under the sink. "Hey, where's the bong?" she asked when she entered the room, and my brothers jaw nearly hit the linoleum floor.

That night, my mother took the bong and the dope over to the doctor's house. But instead of getting high, they had another one of their fights coupled with another one of their breakups. Without my knowledge, she decided to give the dope back. She took the plastic baggy out of the 35 mm film role case and placed it in my coat pocket. Had she left it in the case I would have been fine. Had she told me about it, I would have been fine. Had she held onto it for when she and the doctor got back together, I would have been fine. She did none of those things.

Less than twenty four hours later, I was wearing that coat while standing in a church parking lot with some high school buddies. One of my friends had an open beer. A police officer patrolling the neighborhood looking for misguided rablerousing teens spotted us and pulled up next to my car. My friend with the beer did a pathetic job of hiding the can behind his left butt cheek. The police officer forced him to pour it onto the ground and then asked everyone there for I.D. When I reached into my coat pocket to pull out my wallet, a plastic bag with an eighth of dope fell to the officer's feet.

I was arrested. My mother posted my bail and felt guilty for weeks. I was forced to do community service by cleaning squad cars. When I turned 18, this 'blemish' was erased from my record. Once I made it through college unscathed, I figured the time to get arrested in my life had past.

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As I stood in my doorway, my hands bound together in handcuffs behind my back, I had the notion that this second arrest would have a greater impact on my life than the first.

The two officers, Officer White and Officer Roland, were about to march me down the hall of my condo building, out the front door, onto busy Connecticut Avenue, and into their squad car. I had been read my rights, but I had one request before we left. "I'd like to lock my door," I said. Officer Roland followed me into my bedroom where he had to sort through a pile of dirty clothes to find the key-holding pants that I had worn the night before. He was outwardly frustrated that I could not remember *which* pants they were. I had him grab my wallet, too.

Back at my doorway, Officer Roland locked the door. "I'll give you these at the precinct," he said of the keys. We proceeded down the hallway, two large officers flanking their smaller arrestee.

Here's a tip: living in a large condominium building in a densely populated neighborhood can lead to embarrassment if you plan to get arrested. My walk of shame to the squad car was nothing short of humiliating. The officers and I walked to the elevator and pressed the 'down' button. When the doors opened, one of my neighbors, an elderly woman named Mary who waters my plants when no one is home, got off. The look she gave me included shock, condescension, appall, and a little pity.

The more disturbing encounter occurred after we exited the building. Connecticut Avenue was filled with people starting their commute to work. Officer White stood at my side while Officer Roland unlocked the squad car. Standing there on the sidewalk in front of my building, I felt exposed. I looked to see if anyone I knew was around. Tim Ruck, a resident of my building and a workmate of my former (as of four days ago) live-in girlfriend Tilli, walked out of the building. He saw me, then we looked away from each other.

Officer White helped me tuck into the back seat of the car. I began to realize for the first time exactly what was happening to me.

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This all began when Tilli left me. Tilli and I had been dating for four years. Shortly after I purchased my condo three years ago, Tilli moved in with me. I was in love with Tilli. She is five years younger than me, beautiful, and makes her living a waitress at a local restaurant.

While Tilli's occupation is less than pure excitement, it is a festival of thrills when compared to my computer programming job at a local law research company. I've worked for the same company since I moved to DC in 1992, which was four years after I graduated from college.

Tilli and I had our differences and our friction. I, being an introvert, served to put the brakes on the relationship, while she, being more of an extrovert, consistently sought to spice things up. Typically we were happy with the middle ground that we achieved.

There were major fights, however. Fights that were much more severe than coincidental 'friction.' These fights truly highlighted our differences. They were the manifestation of our undeniable incompatibility. They occurred, on average, semi-annually. Sometimes right before a trip. Sometimes during periods of particular financial strain. Sometimes at completely unexplainable times. These fights often included the cruelest of comments that lovers can say to each other and were then followed by six or seven days of mutual non-communication.

One such harbinger of our inevitable separation occurred about six months before we broke up. I had accidentally opened an envelope addressed to Tilli. The envelope contained a bill from her therapist.

Until that moment, I was unaware that she had been seeing a therapist, and this sent me through the roof. "How long have you been seeing a therapist?" I demanded. She had been seeing a therapist -- off and on - - since before we started going out. "Why do you have to hide this from me?" I asked. She told me it is a personal matter. "What do you tell her that you cant tell me?" "Do you not trust me" "What other things are you hiding from me?" "Do you think I would look down upon you if I knew you saw a psychiatrist?" I questioned her into a corner, and she fought back. She claimed that this was her personal decision and that I had nothing to do with it. She claimed that weather or not I knew about her shrink was inconsequential. And when I became bitterly angry, she countered my irrational behavior by telling me the things that she told her therapist -- the things that I did that bothered her, and the things that made me less than adequate. Not to be out-argued, I told her the things that annoyed me, the things that I wished she would do around the condo, and the things that she did wrong in bed.

The fallout from this argument officially lasted eight days, but in truth, it never went away. We both harbored resentments, and we knew the resentments that the other was harboring. We grew distant. I stopped trusting her. She stopped loving me.

Four days before my arrest, Tilli came home from work. It was a Sunday night, about 9:00. I was glazed over in front of the television, looking past the football highlights on the screen and thinking of, well, nothing. She walked in quietly and went straight to the bedroom. Such un-salutations were increasingly common after the therapist fight. She spent five minutes in the bedroom, then walked into the living room and said "Albert I'm leaving you." There was no punctuation in the way she said the sentence. No comma to indicate some sort of compassion. No exclamation point to indicate anger. No period to indicate that she was addressing another human being. It was just a flat, monotone presentation of some words.

I looked up at her. The emotion missing from her words was present in her face: tears had formed in the corners of her deep brown eyes.

Although this event was foreshadowed throughout our relationship, the pain of hearing those words came as a complete shock. I stopped looking only at her face and looked right into her eyes. My heart sank. This was for real.

Tilli turned and hurried back into the bedroom. I waited a moment and then followed her in. She had already taken out her suitcase and it lay open on the bed. She was grabbing clothes from her dresser drawer. She was in a full-cry now.

"Is this something we can talk about?" I asked, trying to remain calm.

"No," she said, choking on that word.

"Is there someone else?" I asked. Essentially a rhetorical question.

"Yes."

"Who?"

"His name is Carl. He's a manager at work."

"How long has this been going on?"

She was stuffing clothes into the suitcase. She stopped and thought for a second. I don't know if she was calculating the length of time or debating whether to answer my question. Or debating whether to tell me the truth. "Two months," she said.

"Where are you going?"

"I am going to stay at his place tonight. I mean, I'll stay there until I find a place of my own. I'll be back tomorrow to pick up the rest of my stuff."

I sat there dumbfounded. As she prepared to walk out of my life, I did not know what to do. I guess I always knew this was coming, but I never wanted it to happen. I watched her pack. With her back to me and her loose fitting work clothes, all I could focus on was her hair. It was brown, longer than shoulder length, and it flowed smoothly in stark contrast with the tension of the moment. It swayed back and forth as she stuffed a handful of socks in this corner and pressed a shirt into that crevice. Her hair had natural waves, but it also had kinks that were remnants of the elastic 'scrunchie' she used to keep it up while she worked. And it had the oily sheen that most long hair gets after hours in a restaurant kitchen. I stood watching that hair because it was all I could do. I realize now that it took her leaving me to not take her hair (and other things) for granted.

She zipped her bag. "I have to go."

"Is he here?"

"Yes, he's outside."

She stood there. I thought she was waiting for some sort of good bye. A hug. An apology. Well wishes. But then I realized that I was standing in the doorway, and she was trying to determine the least confrontational, least personal way to get past me. In spite of the fact that my physical presence kept her from leaving, I felt completely helpless. My shoulders dropped and my gaze fell to her feet. She acknowledged my conciliatory body language by walking past me, silently, through the hallway, silently, through the living room, silently, and out the front door. The sound of her closing the front door was the last sound in our condo for the next ten minutes. I stood there in the doorway of once our now my bedroom and stared at the place she was.

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The back of the squad car smelled of cheap air freshener and industrial cleaning solution. The air freshener reminded me of DC cabs. The industrial strength cleaner reminded me of the hours I spent cleaning squad cars as a teenager.

As we drove through the residential neighborhoods on our way to the precinct on Idaho Avenue, I looked around the squad car. I was still in a daze. I noticed the doors had no latches and no visible locks. I noticed the standard squad-car blue shade of the non-leather upholstery. I noticed the craftsmanship in the riveting of the fencing that separated the captive back seat passenger from the free front seat passengers. I noticed the numerous electronic devices that supplemented the standard Chevrolet dashboard components. I noticed the back of Officer Roland's large black neck as he drove. I noticed his eyes were not watching the road, but rather the rear view mirror. I looked in the rear view mirror and our eyes met.

"Recognize me?" he asked.

"Sort of," I said. Within a second, I remembered. "We met yesterday. That was yesterday, right?"

"That's right." He looked to the road and then back to the mirror.

"Did you ever catch all the bank robbers?" I asked.



"We have made three arrests," he said, implying that the culprits are innocent until proven guilty but at the same time implying that they are guilty.

"So, the one did not die."

"No, but he is in intensive care." Officer Roland looked back to the road. After a moment, he said "I'm not supposed to tell you this, but what the hell." He proceeded to explain how they identified and subsequently found me.

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The night that Tilli left me was empty, lonely and emotional. I walked around the apartment in confusion. I sat. I stood. I ate. I cried. I laid on the kitchen floor. I picked up the phone but had no one to call. I thought. I thought about Tilli. I thought about where I went wrong. I thought about my anger. I thought about her deception. I thought about four years of wasted time. I thought about four years of happiness. I thought I would miss the sex. I thought it was good to have the sole source of strife in my life gone. I thought that this would change many things in my life. I thought that this was a horrible time in my life for major changes. I thought that I needed to make changes in my life. I did not know what needed changed.

It was quiet in my condo. I had turned off the TV after she left, and I could not turn it on again. Its fake laugh tracks and over-acted melodrama were too much to soothe me or to take my mind off my troubles. What I needed was someone to talk to. Someone to tell me it was OK. Someone who would not mind an 11:30 pm Sunday evening phone call.

I tried to call my mother. No answer. She was probably on another vacation with her friends. Maybe Colorado this time. Or New Mexico. I did not know. I do not talk to her that often.

I thought about others I could call. Not my brother. Not any of my guy friends. Not any of Tilli's friends.

I left my condo and walked the hallway, hoping to find someone, anyone, awake and standing in the hall. Of course, no one was. I went back to my condo.

At 1:00 am, exhausted from thinking too much, and too tired to sleep, I went outside and walked to the 7 Eleven. The employee behind the counter seemed annoyed that I interrupted his quiet time. I felt him watch me as I browsed. I think he expected anyone who came in at 1:15 on a Monday morning to know precisely what they wanted. I had no idea.

I ended up purchasing a 40 oz bottle of beer and a jar of peanut butter. I don't know why I bought the peanut butter, but the beer was intended to help me relax. I walked home.

The beer helped enough to get me into bed. But the bed was empty and cold and it just made me think about Tilli and my future without her even more.

I tossed and turned most of the night. At 4:30, I got out of bed and went to her dresser. I pulled out one of her tee shirts, pressed it against my face and took a deep breath. Lodged in between the fibers of the shirt were the smells I associated with Tilli. I could identify them all: her laundry detergent, her drier sheets, her perfume, and, ever-so-faintly, her own personal smell. The smell soothed and relaxed me. And it made me want more. I went to the closet, to her dirty laundry, and pulled out a work shirt. I could smell more of Tilli. I could smell her coming home from work and her perspiration. I found a shirt that she wore to aerobics class and inhaled its smells. Again, more memories. Again, more relaxation. And more sorrow that she was gone. I put the shirt down and stared at a pair of panties. I decided that their smells and the memories would be too much to handle, and I felt that smelling her panties would violate her somehow. I picked up the aerobics shirt, climbed into bed, placed the shirt on the pillow next to me, and tossed and turned for two more hours.

I fell into a deep sleep around 6:30 am, one half-hour after I usually wake up. At 8:30 I woke up, got out of bed and moved around the apartment aimlessly. Within minutes I realized that I had no desire to go to work. I called in sick and went back to bed.

At 10:30 I woke up again. I sat at the kitchen and stared out the window. It is amazing how the start of a new day can add promise, if only momentarily. As I sat there, I felt the same sorrow over Tilli, but the depression that plagued me the night before was absent. I now realize that depression must simply wake up later than the other emotions because I had worked myself back into a deep funk by noon.

I moped around the condo with nothing to do but wish that I had something to do to get my mind off of Tilli. At 1:30 that afternoon, I was sitting at the kitchen table in my underwear and a tee shirt, hungry but too depressed to make something to eat, when I heard keys in the door. The sound startled me.

Tilli entered and my presence startled her. She was holding two empty cardboard boxes. "I thought you'd be at work." She stared at me.

"I'm not taking this too well," I explained.

"Well, I need to get the rest of my stuff. I won't be long." She walked to the bedroom.

I sat there and listened to her opening drawers in the bedroom. I had spent the last 15 hours composing different things to say to her the next time I saw her. I could not remember any of them.

I got up and walked into the bedroom, half-hoping that my presence would be enough to change her mind and make her come back to me. When I walked in, she looked up from the box she was packing and pointed at the aerobics shirt on my pillow. "Why is that there?" she asked, exposing what I did not realize until then was a secret. I felt shame. Her tone made me realize that my presence would not sway her. I went to the closet and pulled on a pair of pants.

"I am going out to get some food."

"I should be gone by the time you return."

Standing in line at the neighborhood deli, I came to the conclusion that I wanted her back. I placed my order. I decided that right here, right now was my one-and-only chance to get her back. I would admit that I needed to make changes in my life. I would enumerate those changes and convince her to come back. I changed my order to 'to go.'

My appetite subsided and the sense of urgency increased during my hurried walk back to the condo. I had been gone only 20 minutes, but I still felt the need to race home to catch her before she left for good.

I fumbled with my keys at the door. When I opened it, she was there, in the living room, selecting her CDs and placing them in a box.

"Listen," I said, "it doesn't have to be like this. I did a lot of thinking last night, and I don't want to lose you. Its been rough lately, but I can't take it without you."

"Al-" she said, standing up.

"No, don't interrupt. We need to give it another chance. I mean, we put a lot into this. Lets not --" I cut myself off, "I think after four years you owe me at least another chance. We never talked about this. Lets talk. Maybe we can work it out. I can't lose you. What will I do? Who will I talk to? Why?" I was sounding desperate, and my arguments were not convincing. I was not thinking at all about what I was saying. I paused to re-group, and she took advantage of the moment.

"Albert, this relationship has been dead for seven months. We must put it out of its misery. I've moved on. Now you need to."

"Moved on? You just left me last night! In fact, you are still here. Look, I know what is wrong. It is me. I have taken you for granted. I will change. I know I will. Just give me a chance." Without knowing it, I had moved closer to her. Much closer. I had cornered her. I was still holding my turkey sandwich in a bag. We both noticed the uncomfortable closeness at the same time. I wanted to reach out and shake her back into loving me. But I feared I would scare her off. I stood there looking desperate and open.

She slipped out from the corner and placed herself strategically between me and the door. "Albert, please don't do this. You are embarrassing yourself. It is over. I am sick of fighting, I am sick of not loving you, I am sick of you not loving me. Frankly, I don't know if this thing with Carl will last, but I know I need to be away from you." She looked at the box of CDs that I was almost standing in. "Look, I'll have to come back for the rest of my stuff when you're at work." Tilli went to the bedroom to get the things that she had already packed. I followed her and stood in the bedroom doorway as she strapped on an over-stuffed backpack and then placed a duffel bag on a full box. She then bent down and picked up the box.

"I saw you cry last night. This is harder for you than you admit."

She stood there, loaded down with her possessions. "Yes it is hard," she admitted. For a moment, I felt that I had an opening, a foothold with which I could climb my way back into her affection. I saw the emotion in her eyes. The pain of leaving me. But the moment passed. I could see her mentally reach inside herself and find strength somewhere. "It is hard, but it is over. Now please let me leave."

Just as last night, my frame collapsed. My shoulders fell and my head dropped. And just as last night, she walked out of my life, emptiness was her wake.

I dropped the sandwich and wept.

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When we got inside the precinct, Officer White uncuffed me and Officer Roland handed me my keys, as promised. I was fingerprinted and was asked questions about my name, age, address, etc. I was forced to wait a lot.

After all of my information had been collected and appropriately recorded, another officer led me to a small room that I can only describe as an interrogation room. It had a small, sturdy wooden table with a formica top, three folding chairs, and an unabashed two-way mirror. I was left alone with my thoughts.

Throughout this whole process, I had been treated rather well. I believe this was a direct result of my cooperative attitude. I did not resist. In part because I knew I was guilty as charged, but in part because I was too hungry and had no energy whatsoever. Furthermore, I was not the type of criminal that these officers were used to dealing with. And my introduction to Officer Roland the day before provided some sort of connection -- not as if we were friends, but as if we were veterans of the same ordeal.

Thus, in the interrogation room, I was unafraid of what was to come. I expected similar treatment throughout the arrest. But as I began to relax, the adrenaline in my system dissipated, and my ever-present hangover became amplified.

Within moments, my head was pounding and I needed to rest. Sitting in one of the chairs, I put my arms on the table and my head in my arms. I began to get dizzy, so I did not move. I sat there for a minute, maybe five minutes, maybe ten minutes. I do not know how long I sat there. But I do know that sitting there made the room spin more. I began to sweat. I began to notice the nausea.

More time passed. I felt worse. Then, from the depths of my stomach, a burp began to form. It worked its way through whatever was in my stomach. It created a stir that, in turn, created more nausea. Then it broke free. It was small in size, but it carried with it a strong taste of bourbon. This little,

innocent, but alcohol laced burp triggered a gagging reaction and before I knew it, my head was between my knees and I was vomiting on the floor of the interrogation room of the Third Precinct of the District of Columbia Police Department.

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Tilli's second departure had left me with even more of the unwelcome emptiness. After weeping and eating my sandwich, I managed to get myself back outside to the open air. I thought more about our failed relationship and what I could have done better. The thought of Tilli with another man began to upset me. But what bothered me more was the realization that I had known about her affair all along. I could tell by the hours she kept and by the smell of sex on her and by the death of our own sex life that she was seeing another. But I chose either consciously or subconsciously to ignore it.

By 8:00, I had eaten one turkey sandwich, walked two miles, cried three times, drank four beers, and convinced myself that our reunification was possible, necessary and up to me to orchestrate.

So I called her. I picked up the phone and I called her. I called her at work. Some unknown voice answered the phone by offering the name of the restaurant. I asked for Tilli and received an annoyed sigh and a "justasecond." After a minute, Tilli picked up the phone and said, "hello."

"I need to see you," I explained.

"Albert what are you-"

"I need to see you. I need to explain. I've been thinking. It's all my fault."

"Albert, I'm working. Why are you calling me now?"

"Tilli, I need you. I cant lose you. This is hell."

"Look, don't call me here anymore. It is over."

"Tilli, is it tough for you too?"

There was a pause. "Yes. Now don't call me here ever again." She hung up.

I tossed and turned that night again trying to determine if our short conversation was bad (she said it is over) or good (she said this is tough for her, too). I finally fell asleep after convincing myself that there was hope. I woke up and realized that there was none.

It was Tuesday morning. I had spent the last 36 hours swimming in a tub of my own emotions. These emotions included, in alphabetical order: anger, anxiety, depression, desire, devastation, envy, fear, helplessness, hope, indignation, indolence, longing, loathing, love, melancholy, obsession, optimism, pessimism, regret, sympathy, vengeful, want, wanton, and wrong. This emotional disco was exhausting. I decided that I needed to truly clear my mind. I decided that, with a total of only four hours of sleep to keep me going, I should go to work.

I got to the office around 9:30, an hour and a half later than usual. Because I had no desire to listen to the patronizing well-wishing of my co-workers --- the forced pity that I myself have been known to use when others spoke of separations or deaths in the family -- I told no one about the Tilli leaving me. As far as everyone knew I was sick the day before, and I looked like shit today.

But working was an exercise in futility. Computer programming, I realized, is by far not a panacea for emotional overload. When you program you are alone, and when you are alone, there is nothing to stop you from slipping into anxiety, depression, hope, or any of the other available emotion (listed above).

I lasted at work until noon. I told those who needed to know that I was going home sick, apparently the virus was not completely gone. And I walked out. Out of my office, out of the suite, out of the office building and onto K Street. Aimlessly, I kept walking. Down K street. It was lunch hour. People were everywhere. I was nowhere. I walked into a coffee shop. Then I realized I did not want to be in a coffee shop. I walked into a restaurant. But there were too many people and I did not want to be around people. I kept walking into the West End neighborhood. I found a bar without a menu in the window and I entered. There were two people inside, apart from the service staff. I sat at the bar and ordered a bourbon and a beer.

Now, binge drinking, as they call it today, occurred in my high school. I can say that I binge drank several times before I graduated high school. In college, binge drinking was much more common. And much more fun. After college, the rate of binge drinking among most adults -- or at least among most adults I know -- declines drastically. People have jobs that they must keep and binge drinking becomes strictly a weekend activity. People have serious relationships and binge drinking occurs once a

month. People have other activities that they enjoy more than binge drinking and eventually, they reach the point in their life where they enjoy a glass of beer or wine with meals, they get drunk occasionally, and the last time they binge drank they made such asses of themselves that moderation became a way of life.

That is where I was before this miserable Tuesday. The last time I had been binge drinking was over two years ago, at an after-hours holiday bash at Tilli's restaurant. Never again, I vowed. And never again it was. Until this Tuesday.

Like I said earlier, you think you know yourself, but you don't. I began to drink heavily. The hard stuff. Mostly bourbon. Wild Turkey, Jim Beam, Jack Daniels. In spite of my absence from binge drinking, my occasional beers had kept my tolerance relatively high. And by 2:00 in the afternoon, I was relatively high.

There I was in some West End hole-in-the-wall, buying drinks for the two strangers, listening to bad jokes and pontificating on the nature of true love. At some point, I lost control of myself. I had succumb to the drunken stupor. It had been a while, but it was like riding a bike, as they say. Without a moment's warning, I whipped out my Visa card, cleared my tab (the size of which I must wait for the Visa statement to determine) and walked out. I was no longer in control. The stupor was driving.

I remember feeling a pull, as if something had tied a rope to my belt buckle and tugged. That something was Georgetown. With its abundance of college bars and female college students Georgetown had contacted my drunken stupor, and the two conspired to pull me in. "There's liquor and women in Georgetown," they told me. I hardly needed any convincing.

It is a short walk from the West End to Georgetown. Even shorter if, like me, you pay no heed to 'don't walk' signs and give the finger to horn-happy motorists. I eventually found my place on top of a stool at a bar on M Street in the heart of Georgetown's commercial district.

I drank another beer and laughed at my fate. This bar was more crowded than the last. It had a light fare menu, and even though it was well past the standard lunch hour, many people were still eating. I spied two women in business suits in a booth. I was drunk enough that I thought they were attracted to me. I was drunk enough that I picked up my beer, stumbled to their booth and fell in next to one of them.



I have no recollection of what I said, but I do remember eating some of their French fries. Of course, the next thing I remember is being asked to clear my tab and leave by the husky bartender.

I obliged.

In the next bar, I found another lonesome sole. A drunk businessman who was feeling guilty for cheating on his wife. Apparently he left his Northern Virginia office once a week to meet a mistress here in Georgetown. He had just seen her and this time he felt guilty enough to drown his sorrows. I bought him (and me) another drink. I told him my story. He did not care.

Again I cleared my tab and moved on. The tug at my belt was persistent, and the stupor had full intentions of hitting as many bars as possible.

I walked along M Street. At the corner of M and Wisconsin Avenue there is a large bank. I turned right onto Wisconsin and began to walk up the hill. A man with a Daschound was walking towards me. This stopped me dead in my tracks. The man was large, quite large. I am guessing he was well over six feet and topping the scales at 275 lbs. And, of course, the Daschound was small, as Daschounds are. In my drunken state, this contrast was enough to make me stop walking and chuckle. I watched this guy walk towards me with his tiny dog at the end of a retractable leash. I probably smiled and I may have laughed. I wanted to tell him that he looked funny. But I did not get the chance.

As I stood there watching my personal freak show, three men, fully clothed, ran past me. One of them brushed into me and knocked me to the ground. They ran north on Wisconsin Avenue, in the direction of the fat man and the little dog. Two of the men ran to the right of the dog owner. The third ran between the dog owner and his dog, unaware of the leash that connected the two. He tripped over the leash and fell to the ground. The dog was snapped backwards and yanked up the hill past the fallen runner. The runner, who had been carrying a gun, then shot the dog. One second the dog was there, the next it was gone. He rolled over and shot the dog's owner in the shin.

"Wholly shit!" I thought. Maybe I said it out loud, I do not know. I managed to use my impeded motor skills to crawl between two parallel parked cars on Wisconsin Avenue for protection. It was then that I noticed the loud alarm coming from the bank on the corner. And it was then that I realized these runners were in fact bank robbers.

Within moments I heard police sirens. I stayed where I was, between the two cars, undeniably drunk but seemingly sober. And I had to pee. I could not see much besides the post of a parking meter, and I was too scared to move from my hide out. Soon I heard yelling and then gunshots. Even though I could not see, it was apparent that the police had engaged in a shoot out with the robbers. "Fucking cops and robbers," I thought, or possibly said out loud.

"Psssst. Hey!" I heard from behind me. I was on all fours. I craned my neck to look behind me. It was a police officer. "Follow me out. You are safe." I just sat there and stared at him. "You are safe, I say. C'mon!" I backed up. I was scared. I had a lot of liquid in my bladder. "Stay low!" he whispered below the din of the gunshots. "Stay low and get to the other side of the street." I obeyed. He covered me the way Cagney covered Lacey, gun drawn, pointed at the bad guys. I crawled to the other side of the street, between two cars and up onto the curb. I kept crawling up the hill along the other side of Wisconsin Avenue. I crawled along the row of parked cars and among the other innocent and crouching bystanders. I don't know if it was the fear or the liquor or the pain in my bladder, but I kept crawling. I crawled until the people on the sidewalk were standing. That told me that I was far enough from the gun fire to be safe. So then I stood and kept walking. I never looked back. I walked another block and then into a bar. Upon my request, the bartender pointed out the men's room.

When I emerged from the men's room, I realized that the bar's only occupants were me and the bartender. "What's going on out there?" he asked as I sat down at the bar. "Sounds serious."

"Yeah," I replied, "it is. There was a bank robbery. The cops are having a shoot out with the robbers. Can I get a beer?"

"Sure," he said.

"Miller."

Distracted, he reached into the bar and pulled out a Miller. As he opened it, he looked over his shoulder and out the window to catch a glimpse of the action. He handed me the beer.

"Sounds like the shooting's stopped," he said.

I sipped my beer and looked around the bar. The bartender walked over to the window and tried to angle himself to look down Wisconsin Avenue. I watched some of the silent game show on the television that hung in the corner.

"It sounded like a lot of police," he said.

"I'm not sure," I told him. I did not like this bar. I wanted to move on. The tug at my waste had returned. The stupor was back in the drivers seat and was not interested in the robbery. I decided this would be my only beer here.

Then fate took a turn.

After my mother bailed me out of jail at age 16, I had a number of "if onlys" to cling to. If only my mother did not take the pot out of the canister. If only my mother did not put the pot in my coat. If only my friend did not open the beer in public. If only. My if only for this story is this: if only that bartender did not leave bar to watch the cops and robbers. Of course, this if only assumes that I had not control over the events that followed. But I did not have control; to paraphrase my self, I thought I knew me, but I did not.

If only the bartender did not leave the bar to watch the cops and robbers. But he did. "I'm going to step outside and check this out," he said. "You all right in here for a minute?"

"Sure."

And he left. And I sat there. I sipped my beer. I looked around. I did not think. I sipped my beer. I looked outside to see if I was being watched. I was not. I stood up, reached over the bar, and opened the cash register. It was one of those older cash registers that was easy for the lay-person with minimal cash register experience to open. I reached inside, grabbed the 20s, 10s and 5s and closed the drawer. I finished my beer and walked out.

Why did I do this? I wish I knew.

I waked out of the bar and walked back down Wisconsin. There was a crowd on the sidewalk now. In that crowd was the bartender, I was sure, but I did not see him. The stupor was driving and I was being tugged.

There was still a lot of commotion at the intersection of M and Wisconsin. Several police cars with lights flashing, and now seemingly hundreds of bystanders, standing. I walked past them and among them. I walked along the edge of the sidewalk to try to get a view of the carnage, assuming there was some.

"Hey!" I heard. "Hey you!" The voice was coming from the street, from a huddle of police officers. It was the officer that rescued me from between the cars and he was walking towards me trying to get my attention. I stopped and walked towards him. In spite of the fact that I had hundreds of dollars of stolen money in my pocket, I had no fear.

"Is everything OK officer?" I said as he approached.

"Did you see anything that happened?"

I explained to him that I was knocked over, and I told him about the Daschound and the fat guy.

"Listen," he said, "two of the burglars escaped, and we are pursuing them now. I would like to ask you more questions, but I am needed elsewhere. Can I get your name and address and I will call you for more information? Your cooperation would be greatly appreciated."

"Sure," I said. As he wrote down my name and address, I failed to look at his badge. I now know what I would have seen if I had: "J. Roland."

\* \* \*

So here is what happened, as explained to me by Officer Roland. Officer Roland took my name, address and phone number and I left. The bartender from the bar I robbed went back into his bar and noticed me missing. He immediately suspected foul play. He opened his cash register and discovered the crime. He ran into the streets proclaiming he'd been robbed. He ran down to the huddle of police officers. They ignored him. He made them a deal: he would let them use his bar as branch precinct to coordinate the local investigation, make phone calls, and get away from the crowds. He would even put on a fresh pot of coffee. In return, they would agree to put a sincere effort into finding his robber. The officers agreed.

After a couple of hours of walking to and from the crime scene, sharing notes and calling the precinct, four of the officers took time out to watch the bar's surveillance video. There, recorded, was me reaching into the cash register, stuffing my pocket, finishing my Miller, and leaving. Of course, Officer Roland was among the officers watching the video, and he recognized me immediately. Officer Roland told me that he said to the bartender, "I will have your robber arrested by the end of tomorrow." As you know, he was right.

In the mean time, I hit several more bars. By 6:00 I was wowing college kids in Georgetown with my brush-with-death story. I remember nothing after 7:00. I do not know how many more bars I hit. I do not know who I was with. I do not know how I got home. All I know is that I woke up at 7:30 the next morning, on the couch and hungover as hell. I was in too much pain to fall back asleep, so I turned on the television and just sat there. I sat there thinking about absolutely nothing until the loud banging on my door startled me to my feet.

\* \* \*

I assumed that they watched the whole thing through the two-way mirror. Yet they let me sit there for nearly 45 minutes with a pool of my own puke at my feet. Once I realized that they were not going to come into the room -- about 10 minutes after I threw up -- I stood up from the table and laid down in the fetal position in the corner. This was no hangover. It was food poisoning. It was my body rejecting an organ transplant. Or it was malaria. It was too painful to be a hangover. Unfortunately, all signs pointed to hangover.

"What a mess," said some officer -- not Officer Roland or Officer White -- as he entered the room. He threw a small wet towel on me. "Clean yourself up. The chief wants to talk with you." He left.

I pulled myself up and wiped myself off. I sat back at the table. The smell was gut wrenching. I stood back up and used the towel to push the puddle of vomit into the corner. I sat at the table and tried to look presentable. It hurt.

No one came in. Not right away, not for an hour. I eventually fell asleep with my head in my arms on the table.

SLAM! "Wake up!"

I jumped back, and the folding chair clattered and skid beneath me. Officer Roland was standing on the other side of the table. He held a notebook with two hands, the same notebook he just used to slam against the table to wake me up.

"Buddy from Buddy's bar intends to press charges. You get one phone call. We'll be taking you to see the magistrate in 1/2 hour. He'll set your bail. You need to use the can? Go clean yourself up."

An officer led me to the men's room. I peed and washed my face. He took me back to a different interrogation room, almost identical to the one I had just left, except this one had no smell. "Try not to make a mess of this one," the officer said. "We'll be back to get you in 20 minutes."

I had very little understanding of the process that was ahead of me. Luckily, years of television and movies had prepared me for this situation. I knew I was to use my one phone call to ask someone to come bail me out. Otherwise, I would be locked up.

One phone call for the loneliest man on earth.

I contemplated my options. I could not call anyone from work. "Shit!" I thought. I had forgotten about work. I had not called in sick before I got arrested. Well, I was not going to use my phone call to call in sick and I was not going to ask someone from work to come bail me out.

I thought a moment more, then realized that I was in the same predicament as two days ago. I had no one to turn to when my girlfriend left me, and I had no one to turn to bail me out of prison.

My girlfriend. Left me. I began to think of Tilli. I began to wonder again if there was a chance for us to get back together. If maybe she was as lonely as me. If being apart from me was getting harder. "She said it was hard to be without me," I reminded myself.

What if I called Tilli? Could I call Tilli? Could I use my one phone call to call Tilli? And ask her to bail me out of prison? What would she do? Would she come bail me out? Would she realize that she needs me as much as I need her? That she, too, is in a sort of prison without me? Or would she hang up on me?

Absurd. Absurd! "I can't call the woman who just left me for another man to come bail me out of prison!" I thought.

I felt the pain of excess thought. I felt the queasiness of excess hangover. I felt weak with exhaustion. I tried to think of other people to call with my one phone call. My neighbor Steve? I barely know him. And besides, he's surely at work at what ever time it was on a Wednesday. My mother? I had no idea where she was. My brother? No. Not him. What could he do from Delaware, anyway?

I put my head back down on the table. Where were these guys?

My mind returned to Tilli. I realized that my situation provided the true test. If I call her and she does not come bail me out, than I know it is over. I know we are through. If she comes, than there is a chance we will be back together.

It is funny how the post-depression, post-arrest, hungover mind can construct such pretzel logic. But it can.

Eventually, Officer Roland entered the room.

"I'd like my phone call," I said.

"Not yet. We have to talk."

"Phone call! One phone call. I know my rights. One phone call. I want it now." I was ceasing to see this phone call as a means of being released and I was beginning to see it as a litmus test of my relationship with Tilli.

"You watch too much television. There's no such thing as a right to a phone call."

"You told me one phone call! I want my phone call."

"Mr. Cunningham, I think we should talk first."

"I'll talk... After my phone call!" It was now or never. I had to know.

Officer Roland let out a big sigh. He looked behind himself and through the doorway. "Barry," he said, "take Mr. Cunningham to a phone."

Barry led me to a desk with an old, early 80's phone consul on it. He pressed a lighted button at the bottom of the phone. "Your phone call," he said as he handed me the handset.

I tried to remember Tilli's number. "Wait," I said, "what time is it?"

"Two O'clock."

Good. Tilli may be at work. I dialed the restaurant. When Tilli came to the phone, I said, "hi."

"What are you doing? I told you not to call me here. Jesus! Can't you leave me alone?"

"Wait, listen,"

"No! You listen. You leave me alone, you bastard, or I'll get a restraining order. I mean it." She hung up.

"She hung up," I said, looking at Barry. "Is it really only one phone call?"

"Here," he said, establishing another outside line.

I dialed the restaurant again. Tilli answered this time. "Tilli, I'm in jail. I need someone to come bail me out. This is serious. I have no one else to turn to. Just bring some money. Please."

"Your crazy. You want me to come bail you out? Your crazy. I don't even believe you."

"Honestly, I'm serious Tilli, I have no one else to turn to. Please."

"You're shitting me. How much are we talking?"

"I don't know. A couple of hundred, I guess." I looked at Barry, who nodded affirmatively. "A couple of hundred. I have not been arraigned yet."

"You haven't been arraigned yet? A couple of hundred? I don't have that cash. You know that. Do they take credit cards?"

"Do you take credit cards?" I asked Barry. He said no.

"How about personal checks?"

"How about personal checks?" I asked. No, he said. "No," I said.

"Well I don't have that kind of cash, Albert, and you know that. So, sorry, but there's nothing I can do."

I could almost hear her move to hang up. "Wait," I said. "I've got money, I just can't get it. My bank card is at home, in the desk drawer. You can get it for me and take out \$1,000. That will be plenty. You still have the keys. Could you do that for me? That's it. That's all. You don't even have to give me a ride home."



She was silent. "OK," she said. "I'll do it. But not until I get off work. I get off at 7:00. Where are you?" I told her. "What's the access code for your bank card?" I told her that too. "OK, I'll be there." She hung up.

The litmus test was passed, and the fact that there was a chance for us to get back together rushed over me. Barry lead me back to the interrogation room. There was a chance, I thought. She was coming to bail me out. All I had to do was wait five, maybe six hours. There was a chance.

"Buddy's agreed to drop the charges," Officer Roland said as I sat back down.

"I . . . My . . . What?"

"Buddy's dropping the charges."

Buddy's dropping the charges. This meant something important. I was sure of it. I must have had an entertainingly confused look on my face, because Officer Roland just sat and stared at me for a moment with a sly smirk perched above his chin.

"We've had a talk with Buddy," he said, finally. "He's a nice enough fellow. And we've told him that you're, well, you're not a career criminal. He says he'll drop the charges if you cooperate in our investigation of the bank robbery. And if you return his money, of course."

"I . . . The money. . . . Why, sure. I . . . What do I do to cooperate?" Confusion was transforming into elation, with much the same effect on my speaking ability.

"We want you to identify the guy who shot Mr. Johns -- the guy with the dog -- in a line up. And we want you to give a sworn statement about what you saw."

"Sure, I mean, I was kind of drunk, but I can remember. I can do that. I--"

"Tomorrow at noon. Downtown, at the First Precinct on Indiana. There'll be a line up. Just I.D. the guy you saw. It will probably take you the whole afternoon, what with paperwork and all."

Officer Roland continued to give me the who what where and when of my punishment by bureaucracy that was to follow. Assuming (correctly) that I did not know, he also informed me of the total amount of money that I stole from Buddy. Two hundred and thirty-seven dollars. I spent half an hour signing some forms and I was free to go.

I had to walk the two miles back to my condo. As I left the Third Precinct, the first thought on my mind was not about my run-in with the law and not about the robber who may or may not retaliate against the man who identifies him, but rather, it was about what I would say to Tilli. Tilli was pretty pissed when I called her, I thought. But wait until she hears about my day. She's got to think I am. . . I am. . . I am what? Funny? Tough? Desperate? Pathetic?

My stomach roared from not eating in the last -- well, who knows how long -- and from the stomach emptying episode in the Precinct. I felt weak, so I entered a coffee shop on Wisconsin Avenue to purchase a muffin with Tilli still on my mind.

Should I call her and tell her I am out? I asked myself. Or should I just wait to see her when she comes to get my bank card. I decided to take the chance and see her. I paid for my muffin. Will she be happy to see me? No, of course not. But she will be surprised. Well, she'll probably be pissed.

As I continued my walk, I debated the best way to work with a pissed Tilli to change her into one who cares for me still. I tried to estimate the amount of sympathy I would get for having spent the better part of a day at the police station. Not much, I speculated. She'll still be pissed, but I've dealt with that before. So long as I stay calm and rational, she will listen to me and she may come around.

That is how I spent the walk. I used my experience of many years of dealing with an angry Tilli to plan my attack. I called on my training in skirting issues and avoiding my feelings to outline a whole discussion between the two of us. I say this now, in retrospect, because hind site is twenty-twenty. The schemes that I developed on the way home were nothing more than a continuation of the passive-aggressive nature with which I dealt with Tilli. They would perpetuate the anxiety and discomfort and unhappiness that plagued us for the last several months, maybe years.

Of course, what I know now I did not know then, and I returned to my condo with an entire script of what I would say to each of her responses. But I also had the uncomfortable anticipation that always preceded one of our fights. I spent two hours scheming, eating, cleaning and finding the most non-threatening position to be seated in when she came through the door.

At 7:05, I sat at the kitchen table and waited. I did not get up to fix a drink or take a leak because I wanted to be seated there when she came in. At 7:30, I heard her keys in the door. It opened, and she saw me right away.

"Hi," I said.

"What the?" she exclaimed. "Oh, you have got to be fucking kidding me. Albert, you're sick. You're pathetic."

"Tilli, I--"

"I can't *believe* you tried to trick me. What is this? A game? You make up some story about getting arrested and all of a sudden we are back together?" She was still in the doorway, but she was huffing and puffing and moving all over the place.

"I didn't make--"

"Albert, were *through*! I can't believe I fell for this." She turned and put her hand on the door knob.

"But wait, Tilli--"

"Fuck you, Albert. Fuck you."

The door slammed.

From what you know of the similar episodes that preceded this one, I am sure you expect that I broke down and cried. But I didn't. Indeed, I more than anyone am surprised that I didn't. The sound of Tilli slamming the door and walking out of my life did not turn my stomach. Instead, it lifted weight -- a lot of weight -- off my shoulders. The door slammed, the weight lifted, and I relaxed in my chair. I smiled. "Well, Albert," I said, "you gave it your best shot." And I had.

**SUE-**

here are a couple of questions that I have:

The story is filled with these paragraphs that are short and choppy. The second full paragraph on page 9 for example. I like the effect of this type of paragraph, but have I included too many of them? is it distracting?

Does the story keep your attention? What parts did you think were superfluous, long-winded, etc?

And what do you think of the title? Sometimes I like it, sometimes I think it sucks.