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## Whatever Comes Next

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## Whatever Comes Next

My girlfriend broke up with me today. Alright. I could take that. That alone is not the end of it. But I got fired, too. My boss comes to me with his clipboard and his thick rimmed spectacles and scratches the black of his shirt below his name tag. I'm sucking skin between my thumb and pointer finger because it's bleeding from breaking down beer boxes and he tells me that that's it. I was rude to one customer too many.

The lady was a bitch all night. Throwing back meals because her kid didn't like them. Or because he thought they looked better on the floor than on his plate. So she's leaving, right, and her hands still holding the door as I say it, "Two whole dollars, how could I be so lucky?"

She grabs her red haired brat by the collar. He claws and scratches her grip. A sharp gasp from the back of the room. The low rumble of collected voices. Banging pots and the scrape of silverware. An old man grabs his wife by the elbow and shakes her arm.

"Excuse me?" the lady says and sees if anybody else is listening.

"Thank you," I reply. I shake the money in the air. "A five percent tip on a forty dollar dinner. That's generous." Her brat orders four meals and eats one of them and I get stiffed on the tip. I'm working my ass off with the pleasantries every time she tells me, "Look, we need something else, isn't there anything on this menu?" I just say, "Oh, I'm sorry ma'am, yes right away we'll get that grilled cheese for you right away." And then she screws me.

The kid whines and scrapes his shoes at the floor. Her face trembles. I can smell chicken cordon bleu and it makes me think of this ugly vein creeping up her forehead.

"You're lucky with what you got," she says. Alice tugs the back of my shirt, whispers in my ear for me to calm down.

"Lucky?" I say. "Lucky? You're lucky I'm working otherwise I would." Alice puts her hand over my mouth.

"Is this the lady that sent back the meals?" Danny, the cook, says. The commotion must have made its way to the kitchen.

“Yes,” the lady says, and tucks her chin into her neck. She releases the kid and he shoots off into the parking lot and disappears.

“You didn’t like your meals?” Danny asks, slowly swinging a spatula at his side.

“They weren’t what my kid wanted,” she says and looks behind her.

“You can’t please them all,” Danny says and walks back into the kitchen.

“Let’s just leave this be,” Alice says, and tugs at my shirt. The room gets dark. Fluorescent lights flicker like an electric bug zapper. A few customers leave, finishing their drinks and placing their green cloth napkins on the tables.

“Leave this be?” I yell.

“Let’s just calm down,” the lady says, and her eyes go small, like she can play everyone against me. “I don’t know how you got this job but you won’t keep it the way you’re acting.”

“That would be too bad,” I say and walk up to the lady. Sweat greases from her face and loud, heavy breaths struggle from her lungs. “If I lost this job, I wouldn’t be able to meet the gems of the earth like you.” She steps back, anger rising, and I yell, “Where would I be then? Where would I be with out all you wonderful customers?” And I spin with my hands in the air, like in a movie where the character and camera sweep the beautiful new cityscape. I can almost hear the music, *“and I’m gunna make it after all.”*

“What do you have to say to that?” I ask, but she just says some bitch thing about getting the manager. I throw my hands in the air like I can toss her away. I leave to break down boxes and, although I didn’t know it right then, get fired.

Ann walks up me as I’m sitting on my couch eating a packet of ramen noodles dry. Dry, right. I didn’t even cook them and she walks over with her cotton skirt swaying and bracelets sparkling and she tells me she’s had enough. “I’m going to my parents,” she says, standing in front of the television.

“Alright,” I say, and try and nudge her out of my line of vision. *CSI* is on and David Caruso is getting right into his tough guy act. “See you tomorrow.”

“No,” she says, “you won’t.” And I don’t think I hear her right.

I mean, I'm not really paying attention.

"What?" I ask. Ramen noodle crumbs line the floor. She picks them up, puts them in her pocket, and says, "I'm not coming back, Ted."

What? I thought things were going great. Well, maybe not great but they weren't going bad. It's not like she caught me fucking her sister.

She walks the stairs to her room. When I get there she's packing her stuff into my brown and grey suitcase.

"What do you mean you're not coming back?" I say, and take her clothes out the suitcase, placing them on the bed.

"Stop it, Ted," she says, louder than I expected. She puts the clothes back in and frowns at me like she's the one getting her heart broken. The radio plays some upbeat disco crap and as I pull the cord from the wall a bright blue mass of electricity fades into the air. Rain smacks the window. Loose weather stripping flaps the pane.

I throw the suitcase into the back of *our* Taurus and slam the door. Rain is falling heavy and I didn't bother to grab a coat. She clutches her arms tight and looks at the ground.

"Look, baby," I say, and place my hands on her shoulders. She smacks them off and looks down the street. "Tell me what's going on. I just want to know what the fuck is going on."

She glares at me like I already know and am trying to be an ass. She starts to say something, shuts her mouth, and shakes her head. She starts to shiver.

"Come on," I say. "Out with it." And I curl my fingers like I can draw the words from her.

"I can't keep supporting you while you go from job to job, *Ted*," she says, like my name tastes bitter in her mouth. "That's not who I am. That's not what I'm meant to be. I'm not the supporter." Her breath smells of wine and mascara runs down her face.

"Damn straight you're not," I say, like it's a fact she wouldn't want to admit. "You think you're better than me because you're a fucking secretary?"

"Yeah, okay, we're done," and she gets into the Taurus.

"You work for a realty company," I yell. Trailing exhaust steams. "You don't even sell the dreams. You just answer the phones for the people that do."

Bangs blow into my eyes. The moon is half full and a dog's

hoarse bark fills the air. Rain runs down my face. Taillights drop below the hill like stars over the horizon.

Ann was a few years older than me in high school. We'd been dating for a couple months before I took her to this hill I knew overlooking the city. Wind flapped her red hair like uncontrollable flames and although it was cold we never put the top up on the convertible. Pink Floyd blasted from the speakers and fell back into the night like northern lights. The road was narrow and dusty and tops of pine trees poked over the bank like they were peeking up for a view. I drove next to the edge. Ann scooted close and grabbed my arm. She looked over the bank, shivered, then stuck her chin against my shoulder and whispered, "Back to the middle," her lips close to my ear. I smiled and gave her a wink.

We tossed our shoes in the grass and laid down a blanket. The faint scent of autumn leaves burned, like somebody far off was having a bonfire. We opened a bottle of Yellowtail. The city shined from below and stars cast down from above and I felt as if we were in the exact middle. A place where you could lie in the grass and fall asleep.

Ann closed her eyes and wrapped her lips around the wine. She took a long drink. Her throat rippled. Moonlight shone pale on her skin.

"You like that?" I said. She nodded and smiled.

I set the bottle down. We sat in silence. Below, the city looked like a strand of Christmas lights. For a second, the wind was soundless and it was the warmest quiet I have ever known. Ann rubbed my foot with hers and I straightened. She was about to say something.

"Where's your mom?" she said, and tied her hair back with a turquoise rubberband.

"I don't know" I said. A couple weeks ago she had up and left me and my father and we hadn't heard from her since. I asked my father about it and he said he didn't know, then mumbled something about how everybody in the army was a bastard, that they didn't care about real life and real problems. They only know how to kill, he said, and it didn't have to be with a bullet. Tears welled in his eyes and he looked past me as he spoke, like he wasn't speaking to me but off into the world. He went to the bars and I didn't see him for two days.

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I didn't know what he meant, right then, because I had never met anybody in the army. Later, some grunt officers came to my school, tried to recruit the senior boys of my class. I saw, that day, the way they looked at girls. The lust in their eyes. The confidence that they could get any women they wanted. I knew what happened to my mother and it was a sad, sad thing.

"You poor little child," Ann said and ran her hand along my jaw line. "You must feel like the world's coming down on you."

I looked into the night and thought about my mother. About where she was. Whether she was thinking about me. Whether she was sitting on top of some hill and looking down on empty, eerie lights, wondering if she would ever know what it was like to be connected with them all.

"Watch now," Ann said, lying down. She pointed at the stars. "If you see a shooting star, you get to make a wish, any wish at all, and it will come true."

I propped myself on my elbow. I felt grass blades beneath the blanket. Ann looked as peaceful as I've ever seen her. Her green eyes reflected the night. I looked in her eyes for a long while and she barely blinked. I ran my fingers along her soft red hair. I said, "You'll never leave me, will you?"

"Never ever," she said, and I could see the constellations in her eyes. I could see the North Star, pointing the handle of the Big Dipper.

Dirty, yellow light molds over my eyelids. Downstairs, the TV's still going. Martha Stewart works this black and white spatula around a big red bowl and tells her audience how great life is. I almost call to Ann. I bite the inside of my cheek to keep the tears from coming. Dust covers the floor and dishes pile the sink.

I pick the paper up off my lawn. Snowcapped ridges of the Beartooth Mountains edge the sky over the horizon. A few thin, wispy clouds hang. My neighbor, Phil, is washing his Lincoln and playing jazz music. Piano notes play off beat as he twists a yellow sponge over a red bucket, suds plopping against the water. He works the sponge over his front hubcap. His long sleeves are scrunched above his elbows but still wet.

He turns to me and stands and waves. "It's a particularly nice day, huh Ted?" And flicks his hands dry.

"Yeah, it is." I lie. Sure it's sunny, nobody is going to argue

that. But sun can get into your skin, absorb itself into your veins as you're sitting on the couch and dust covers your floors and food crusts your dishes. You can't do anything but try and sweat it out, sit there and wait as your body pumps hot sun out your pores and onto your shirt and underwear. The day's nice alright. Real fucking nice.

"It's so hot I might not even have to dry," he says, teeth shining like white candy. His thin grey hair slicks back behind his ears. He's retired. Been so since I moved here five years ago. Said he got out of the stock market while it was hot and never looked back. I don't hold it against him, though. Too nice a fella.

"Watch out for those spots, Phil," I say. I walk towards my door. I don't think he understands me, though, and he smiles and waves as if I haven't really said anything.

I flip to the help wanted section. Burger flipper. Burger flipper. Dishwasher. Administrative Assistant for Waddell and Reed Financial Services. Nothing. Nothing worth wasting my time over. Just minimum wage crap and jobs out of my league.

I never went to college, right. Never saw any reason to. My mother and father had both gotten degrees and what did they have to show for it? One became a weak alcoholic, scrapping by on welfare, the other a faded memory, so far gone from my life that I didn't know what job she held or how she got by. Last I heard she was a beautician down in Los Angeles, but that was some time ago.

When I graduated I packed a box full of clothes and case of cassette tapes into the back of my Gremlin and drove to the truck stop where Ann worked. I made her take her break, sat her down, and told her I was moving to Montana where the air is fresh and the land untamed and that I hoped she would come along with me. I told her fuck Dallas, right, fuck all of Texas. She was unsure at first, and it took some convincing, but I told her how magical the place was, how the sky can carry on for days and open to the sun like she's never seen before. She looked towards the interstate, then, where a deep, sooty smog hovered in the sky like the bottom of an ashtray. Another waitress coughed in front of us, cleared the phlegm from her throat and leaned her elbow onto the booth of a scrawny, jittery trucker,

"What'll you have, darling?" she asked, her thin, bleached hair looking like it's going to fall onto the table.

“Only you, honey,” the trucker said, smiling an old, wrinkly smile. And that was it. That had done it. Ann gave one disgusted look around the room, set her apron on the table and left without telling her boss.

The manager that fired me, Edward, is working today. His shifts line up like that sometimes. So I decide it. What the hell, maybe he’ll give me my job back. I mean, it was hectic last night and maybe he slept off his anger.

The roads are trafficless. Gasoline fumes float in my busted side window. I had to take the Gremlin, since Ann escaped in the Taurus, and I’m grinding gears and mashing the clutch and hoping that the gas needle doesn’t drop below E.

I park on a different street so that Ed won’t see me. I don’t want him to know what I’m doing until I’m right in his face, until I can smell the oil on his pores and look into his small eyes and crowd him enough that he has to act like a man.

The parking lot is empty but of two cars. Ed’s Datsun and Alice’s Jeep. Orange lines draw the pavement like a chalk sketch at a murder scene. Paper cups lay against the bottom of a trashcan. Something doesn’t seem right. There should be more cars. At least one.

A light blue condom wrapper lays in the soil next to bushes. I pick it up, feel the slick plastic between my fingertips. The condom’s been removed. I drop it. A shudder moves down my spine and I wipe my hands against my pant thighs.

Inside, the place is empty. One customer sits along the back corner, his forehead pressed to the surface of a table. A coffee mug sits next to him, and when he hears me, he jerks his head, looks confused, then rests back against the wood. Florescent lights glow something unnatural and I feel like the whole place is covered in plastic wrap.

I walk into the kitchen and it’s as if the backroom fades behind me. Prep counters glow and the metal spatula shines silver metallic. The dish spray nozzle dangles from its holder, swaying back and forth, but no dishes line the sink and the sanitizer sits quiet. Trashcans are empty and so is the order slip.

I call out, “Hello, hello.” Only echoes.

I walk towards the manager’s room and the door slowly opens. Ed sticks his chin against the wood so that all I see is his face.



He pops his head back and closes the door. Commotion. Muffled voices. A girl says, “relax, ease up” and the door opens.

Ed slides ivory colored buttons through the slits of his black shirt. He holds his head high in the air, like he’s waiting for me to make a move, and Alice walks behind him, hair disheveled. She runs her palms down her pant thighs. She smiles an embarrassed smile and looks at the floor.

“What are you doing here, Ted?” Edward asks.

“I’m getting my job back, *that’s* what I’m doing Eddy, my boy,” and I can’t help but bite my bottom lip. Alice shakes her head. Her jaw line tenses and relaxes as she chews a piece of gum.

“Is that so?” Edward says, “Why would that be again?” As if he doesn’t know.

“Who do you think you’re fooling?” I say and force a few short, winded laughs. “Are you kidding me or something? You don’t think I know what you and Alice were doing back there, with you coming out buttoning up your shirt and her hair all a mess.” I flip my finger at his shirt, then Alice “And, oh, by the way, don’t you have a wife? What do you think she would say about all of this? Let alone the big wigs at Chili’s?” I cross my arms and stare in a pleased manner.

“My god,” Alice says. “How gross.” And pulls both hands up, palms out, like she’s showing a cop she doesn’t have anything illegal. She walks past me, shaking her head.

“Are you serious?” Ed asks. The sanitizer starts, rattling ceramic dishes. Alice slices onions.

“Come on, Eddy boy,” I say, and have to speak up to be heard over the spray of water. “Nobody else is here. Where’s the waitress?”

“Was that two pounds or three?” Alice asks. My eyes sting from onion juice.

“Three,” Ed says but keeps looking at me. He sighs. “Ted,” he says, “get the hell out of here.” I look at him like he’s kidding. I clench my fists and squint my eyes to see if he’s serious. “I mean right now, or I’ll call the cops.” And he points toward the dining room.

“Fuck you you’re nothing but a two bit fucking restaurant manager anyways,” I say. I step into the darkness of the dining hall. My face is hot and my neck is tense. Fluorescent lights chop the room. “There are plenty of jobs out there,” I enter the dining

room and kick a couple chairs over. The lone customer cringes into the corner and grabs his coffee mug with both hands. Ed threatens with the cops again. I knock some napkins and silverware onto the floor and head out the door.

Clouds form over the horizon. The air dampens, becomes musty. A crow flies past my window and I wonder what it would be like to have wings, to be an animal, to be able to fly into the air and above the clouds where problems don't exist. Instead I'm grounded, stuck on the bitterness of the earth where a woman will leave you and a man will fire you for no good reason and then threaten the cops on you. All this when you're only trying to piece your life back together.

I close the curtains and a shadow falls over the floor. I pick up the phone and dial Ann's number. She answers on the third ring.

"Ann here," she says, and her voice sounds so sweet, so nice. She was probably expecting my call.

"Hey baby," I say. "It's me." Like she's away on business.

Ann sighs. "Please, don't do this," she says. My heart steadily gains rhythm. I breathe in and out of the receiver. I squeeze the phone cord between my fingers and try and think of something to say. Something that will make this turn in the right direction.

"Hey, um..." but my voice fails. Silence follows. Commotion in the background. The voice of man. My heart beats faster and harder. Thumps against my temples. And still this silence between us. And still this man's voice. I can see him, sitting in her father's leather chair, drinking scotch without ice and crossing his legs like a jackass. I can see the bleached tips of his hair and delicate dimples of his face. Oh, I bet he's charming the hell out of Ann. Ann and her whole family.

"I'm glad you left," I say and hope she's offended. Hope she cries into the telephone and tells the man to leave and begs me to take her back. I hope she realizes that her life's not the same without me.

But she doesn't. She sighs and feels sorry for me. She tells me she hopes that I don't hate her. That she had to do what she did for her own sake. She wishes me the best of lives. Hopes I find my raft and never have to struggle with the waters again. And she hangs up.

The rest of the night doesn't matter, right? It's just crying and despair and everything that goes along with it. It's just rock bottom, as they say.

Darkness settles. The sun sinks and starts rain drizzling and I walk out on to my lawn to look at the dark underbellies of clouds. The moon's hidden. Rain ratta-pat-pats against the streets like a drum roll, gaining momentum, I can feel it.

Headlights reach into the air from behind me. Cars pass, happy people with places to go. Friends to see. I look in the window of a car stopped at a red light. A woman laughs and street lights cast her in an eerie yellow haze. The driver turns towards her, waving his hands and talking excitedly. She touches his shoulder and laughs and they drive away.

Commotion builds from Phil's house. Music and talking and shouts of appraisal. The side window glows orange and shadowy figures of people move. Somebody holds a glass in the air above their head, sets it below their waist, and walks out of view.

Ahead of me, a small break in clouds forms. A few stars shine through. The North Star points the handle of the Big Dipper, the guiding point of the night, and I look up and watch, wait, hope. Maybe, just maybe, a shooting star will streak. Maybe there will be something that will show me that this is just a day like any other day, only one that let the world crash down on me.

A little girl walks up. She leads this brown and white bulldog as it sniffs the ground. The girl's tan corduroy overalls strap to one shoulder and her shoes flash red lights. She smiles like rain's not hitting the top of her head.

The dog sniffs a trail to my feet. It touches its muzzle to my shoe and sniffs. It licks the top of my sneaker. The girl giggles.

"What's this mutt doing?" I say and shake my foot. The dog stops, waits, and when my foot's planted on the dirt, sniffs again.

"It's not a mutt," the girl says. "His name is Bambi." She can't be more than seven or eight and has to be a relative of Phil. Got too many freckles not to be.

The dog paws at my laces, kicking its back feet. "What's this thing doing?" I ask, and the girl giggles and covers her mouth. Above me the break in clouds begins to fade, the North Star already consumed by a progressing storm. Phil's house has gotten louder and I can almost make out the music. Stevey Ray Vaughn

or B.B. King or some type of blues.

I stick my other foot at the dog. It walks over and sits at the girl's feet. She pats its head and rubs its ears.

"What," I say and wait for the girl to look at me, "it didn't want that one?"

"I think your shoe had poop on it," she says and covers her mouth.

The music quiets down. Phil walks over with an umbrella and an unhappy look on his face. He puts his arm around the girl and covers her from the rain. "It's time to come inside now, Sweetie," he says and then says hello to me.

"I was just talking with the kid here," I say and put my hands in my pockets. Phil looks at me and squints and looks into the night. Rain's coming harder than before, splashing as it hits pavement. My clothes are soaked and I feel a chill sink into my skin. I don't want to go inside.

"This is my granddaughter, Emily," Phil says and pats her shoulder. He looks down at her and smiles.

"Is that so," I say, just to say something, and Phil nods his head.

"Her and her parents drove in tonight." Phil says and motions to a green Ford Explorer in his driveway. It's backed in and the front grill is all smashed, but that's none of my business. "My daughter, Beth, and her husband, Mark," he says, looking at the car.

"Right, your daughter, I think I remember something along those lines." But I don't think I can. I don't think me and Phil ever got that deep into a conversation.

"All the way from Miss-Zourri," he says and looks at Emily and pats her on the shoulder again. Bambi's tongue hangs, panting it up.

"Is that so," I say and squat on my heels in front of Emily. "What brought you all the way over here?"

"I don't know," she says and buries her face into Phil's side.

"They came to visit their old grandpa-pa," Phil says. "Right Em?" But she just leaves her face snuggled against his side.

"Well," Phil says and looks at me like the conversation's about to end. "There's also a fourth running around. His name's Jeremy. I thought I would hunt them down and bring them out of this weather. It looks like it's about to get ugly."

I look up into a starless sky. Deep purple-blue clouds stretch from the horizon and over me and beyond, to an endless oblivion, to the edge of places I'll never be or experience. The rain is bigger and thicker than when I first came out, falling like lava bombs on judgment day. Phil is right. It's about to get nasty.

"It's going to get bad," I say and smile at the little girl, who's stopped hiding behind her grandfather. "But I've seen worse." And I wave goodbye.

I fix myself a bacon sandwich. When it's gone I drink a glass of milk and feel satisfied. I lay on the couch in my living room and the overhead fan whips grey and black petals along the ceiling. Cars drive by. Spinning tires rush along rain soaked roads. Splattering and whooshing water blends with the steady hum of motors, and, ebony tires shoot silver crowns that glisten and shimmer and break into jewel encrusted puddles on darkened streets.

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