

It was the second most exciting moment of my life, except this was the first time that I was actually dying. I was never one of those people to see the light every time I had the slightest physical inconvenience, so when my doctor told me it might be true, I didn't know how to react. The symptoms didn't seem serious enough; fatigue, getting thinner inexplicably and growing paler and more aged-looking on the outside. They seemed like the symptoms of a nothing disease, some sort of prevalent food allergy like dairy or gluten. The signs were there, but when I took the tests they all showed that I was apparently normal.

My doctor told me that I was dying first, to get that out of the way. "I see this very often with young men your age, more often than you think. You're suffering from a lack of touch." In the blur of the news, I looked down at my hands.

"Not from you," she said. "Towards you. What I mean is, you're lacking human physical contact in your life."

"I touch 10 people every time I'm in a crowded subway. You've got your hand on my shoulder right now!"

She removed her hand from my shoulder and clasped them both behind her back. "Those are shallow connections. You need something more intimate than that to remedy your condition."

"I haven't had sex since high school," I said softly.

"It doesn't need to be sexual," she said, "it just needs to be meaningful. Don't you have any close friends or family?" My family lived in New Jersey, somewhere that I hadn't been in nearly six months and didn't necessarily desire to return to. I visited my parents maybe three times a year. I had never had a big family, either, and while my dad's mom sent me a text every

few weeks to tell me she was thinking about me and hoping I was enjoying my new apartment in the city that I had lived in for two years, the others I talked to on Thanksgiving and maybe on the 4th of July but that was mostly the extent of our relationship.

My friends, however few, were better. Closer. I saw them more often and regarded them very highly. It was lucky enough that the friends I had met in college and the ones I had met after I graduated liked each other enough to hang out themselves. I had always felt proud of being the bridge there.

“You can’t just give me a hug and cure me?” I asked my doctor.

“It needs to be meaningful. You can’t force it.” Having gone to her for several months, I resented that, but only in my stubbornness and fear of facing what I knew was a problem I had to fix for myself.

“How much time do I have?”

“I think if you don’t find a solution in the next, oh, two months you’re getting into dangerous territory.”

There was part of me that almost didn’t believe her, but maybe hearing her talk about the condition a bit convinced me that I had heard of it before. People could die of a physical broken heart, right? I thought maybe this was like that, but it took some convincing that I really was lacking this much. I was a normal human being, I had connections to people in my life. I couldn’t be this bad.

I asked her if I could tell people about this, and her laughter in a situation that was so unfamiliar to me felt unfair.

“This isn’t a witch’s curse,” she said. “There’s nothing keeping you from telling people that are close to you in your life.” She kept her mouth open for just a second, then closed it, but I could read what she was thinking right on her face. “Well, if you can find any.” I decided I didn’t want to go back to that doctor anymore.

On the subway ride back, I sat with an empty seat on each side of me and left my phone in my pocket. I was always one of those people who thought about how terrible it was that everyone was on their phones all the time while being on it myself. No one in the half-full car looked at anyone. Most of them were on their phones but the ones who weren’t read books or newspapers. One slept, a decrepit looking man whose feet didn’t even reach the floor of the car, legs swinging as we pushed along.

Even though I tried to keep my mind blank, not wanting stare my own mortality in the face just yet, I thought about what my doctor had said. Didn’t I have any close friends or family? The last time I had seen my parents was at a bus stop in January, a couple months earlier. My bus back into the city wasn’t due for another 20 minutes, but I was standing with my hood up and my one hand clutching the exact change for my ticket in my pocket, afraid that if I let my fingers off the bills for a second they would suddenly go missing. My mom was pulled over in the bike lane with the driver’s side window of her Kia Soul rolled down, and my dad was in the back seat with their dog, Panda, a great, white mutt on his lap.

“Can’t I wait in the car with you guys for a couple more minutes?” I asked.

“Sorry, hun, I don’t want to keep the car idling for too long. Your bus’ll be here any minute,” my mom said. I forced my frigid hands, still holding the money, deep into my coat pockets.

“When’s the next time you’re gonna come visit us? Your birthday?” my mom asked.

“I actually wasn’t planning on coming here for my birthday, mom. I have plans.”

“Well, you gotta come see us on your birthday. We’ll miss you.”

“I could probably come the week after if you guys are around. I have a couple vacation days.”

“When’s that?”

“May. First week of May.”

My dad finally piped in from the back to say “Your mom and I are going on a trip that week. Probably no good.” My mom agreed with him.

A car trying to pull out of a driveway beeped at them, and my mom hurried around the corner, then pulled over again. I stuck my hand in the back window to give Panda a pat and my parents blew me kisses.

“We’ll talk about it soon. Call us sometime. Have a safe trip back, ok? Be careful,” my mom said as she started to drive off.

I said “Ok,” but my mom responded with “I love you, too,” and then she was gone. When I got back to my apartment, I made myself boxed mac and cheese and for a second I thought about the decently great home cooked meals I had had for the past week and thought “Maybe I wish I was still home,” but it didn’t last.

I watched the station numbers go up as I stayed mostly with a wide bubble of space between me and the other passengers. “What about my friends?” I thought. I had just seen them the previous week. My mind was clinging to the idea that if I could come up with a meaningful connection, maybe I could prove that this disease must be something else, that I was actually just

gluten intolerant and that was the reason my skin was getting worse and I was losing weight at a rate that didn't make sense. I tried to come up with one as hard as I could, but I couldn't remember the last time I had touched any one of my friends. The last time we had been together, I thought I patted one of them on the shoulder, but it lasted maybe half a second, and that was assuming I wasn't just trying to force a memory that hadn't happened at all. The more I tried, the more I realized that maybe my doctor really knew what was best, and my sour mood settled in like dust.

Over the course of my subway ride, folks had come and gone but the volume of people remained mostly the same. Several stops later, though, a horde of people flooded the car, filling every space and reaching for every handle. I was sandwiched on both sides and tried to keep my legs in as much as I could, but it didn't help. Our shoulders touched. Our knees touched. The guy on my right even put his heel on my foot and just never noticed, and the sleeping man's head fell gently on the shoulder of the woman next to him who was trying so hard to move herself out of the way. I felt like Play-Doh being forced through a shaper as I held my bag out in front of me to get through the doors without hitting anyone with my turtle shell of a backpack.

Sometimes I would go weeks without doing anything but work and sleep. I was working as a teaching assistant at the time, helping students barely younger than myself understand work that I barely understood the first time. I came in on weekends and stayed late to help students prepare for tests. What started as a Monday-Friday job that left my nights free now consumed what felt like my every free moment. On the way home after work, I'd talk myself up about all the interesting and productive things I would do when I got back, but before I even got up the

stairs all I wanted to do was sleep. Once in awhile I would cook, and that would be my productive moment of the day. Most of the time, I didn't.

Going to the doctor was the first time I had left the house for something other than work in about a week and a half, and my apartment showed it pretty bad. Not knowing what to do with myself, and with a new discontent combined with the sickness I had been feeling for weeks, I cleaned my apartment, dusting things I didn't even know could accumulate dust. After maybe an hour, I stepped into my poorly lit bathroom, probably with the intention of cleaning it. I leaned over to the mirror and all I saw were the bags under my eyes and the slight gap in my teeth and the veins that stuck out of my forehead when I clenched my jaw. Why was I always clenching my jaw? It seemed like that physical defect could be easily fixed if I could just keep my damn jaw straight for five minutes. No wonder no one would touch me.

There was a text on my phone, and the vibration pushed it off the sink and it landed face down on the rug. It was Patrick, the only person from the school I liked enough to give my personal phone number to, even though the circumstances of our meeting were pretty unfortunate. I had just started to get over the fact that this guy I knew from the staff lunch room, barely older than me, was a teacher, a real teacher while I was over here assisting and subbing when I was lucky, when I actually had to assist him in his own classroom for lab safety. I looked around at the students and knew that none of them could ever understand how ironic this was to me. Patrick had just started to explain that the hottest part of the bunsen burner flame was the blue, lower part when one tipped over on a stack of handouts and set the whole thing ablaze. Patrick, like the responsible authority figure he was, started quickly but calmly herding students out the back of the classroom. I wish I could say the same for myself but, without thinking, I

leapt onto the fire extinguisher and went at the flames while trying my best not to make any audible screams. I had figured out from hearing student conversations that a teacher could easily be the center of the bad kind of gossip, but this had certainly made me the center of the good kind. I think Patrick and I hit it off from there.

Likewise, it was typical for Patrick to have been the only person I told about my appointment. *Are you back?* he said, then 30 seconds later, *didn't you say you had to go to the doctor or something? So are you dying or what?* It would have been funny otherwise, and because I wanted him to keep thinking it was funny, I told him I was waiting to get some test results back. I couldn't imagine how I would begin to explain this anyway.

I had never really believed people when they said how a near death experience made them throw caution to the wind and go after all those things they had been keeping themselves from for so long but, in my case, it could actually save my life. If I couldn't remedy my condition with the sources I had, then I'd just have to go out and find some new sources. That night, not knowing what else to do, I went to a club, and I went alone.

As soon as I was there, I remembered why I never went to places like this. Almost everything about it was awful. The room smelled of cheap, spilled drinks and a distinct malfunction of deodorant. Everyone looked sweaty and their eyes were glazed over, like they were trying to show me that they were enjoying themselves more than they actually were. I didn't know how to dance. When I was in the thick of a crowd I jumped up and down to songs I didn't like and when I was at the edge, I just stood and watched. I wished I had worn a lighter shirt.

Then, she found me. As I stood at the edge of the crowd, I noticed a pair of what looked like little springy antennae with pom-poms sailing high above the crowd and coming towards me. As she broke the crowd, I noticed that she looked like a partial bumble bee with the pom-poms, a yellow shirt, and black jeans.

“You look so sad standing here by yourself,” she said. I thought it would be funnier when I said “Yeah, well you look like a bee,” but it just came off as touchy.

She took it in stride, though. “Yeah, that was kind of the goal. I hate Halloween because it gives people a sanctioned, very structured time to express themselves. Maybe I want to dress like a bumble bee on a Thursday.”

“Kind of like how you can’t prank people on April Fool’s Day because they’ll just see it coming.”

“Exactly!” she said, and she offered to buy me a drink. I bought her one in return. She told me her name was Melanie and, maybe it was just wishful thinking, but I thought she was perfect.

I was serious when I said I hadn’t had sex since high school. It was the opposite of intimate if I really thought about it. At my first, and what turned out to be last house party, I was pulled aside by the guy who was hosting, an upperclassman who always talked to me in a way that felt too earnest, a way that I couldn’t tell whether it was a joke or not. He introduced me to a senior girl who was cute and really friendly, a friend of his. We spent a lot of the night dancing, and some of it talking about things I couldn’t remember afterwards. Eventually, she pulled me into one of the rooms upstairs, and things went farther than I expected them to. I was so self-conscious that I missed all of the good parts I was promised, and just got all the guilt and



embarrassment. It was hard to focus when people kept knocking around the hallway looking for a bathroom, anyway.

This time wasn't like that at all. We went back to my apartment and I was relieved that I had cleaned my room in my rampage. Melanie was so cute and funny and all the interesting things she had said to me throughout the night made me feel so much better. In high school I would have felt self-conscious that she was clearly more experienced than me, but now it just felt like a relief. When I woke up she had already left, but one of the pom-poms was still on my dresser. Already I had more energy than I could remember having in the past year. I was a new man.

But, as things do, the feelings faded. We texted at first but at some point, I don't remember when, she just stopped, and then so did I. The bags under my eyes returned along with my dead complexion. I was tired again. I was always so tired.

Back at what I considered my peak "healed" stage, I actually called my parents. I hadn't wanted to, but I figured I at least owed them a call to say I wasn't going to die. I was so happy that I didn't hold it over them too much when it went straight to voicemail. I told them that I wanted to call earlier but had to sort things out for myself first. I used vague terms to describe how my doctor said I could be going down a 'dangerous path' if I didn't 'change my habits and my lifestyle.' "I fixed it, though." I said. "I'm okay. Everything's okay."

My mom called me back maybe a day later and asked me what I had, and I told her not to worry about it. She asked me if I was keeping up with any medication I needed. I told her that I was and, foolishly, I believed it. She said that she and my dad were definitely going away the

week after my birthday and that maybe I could come the week after that. I said I'd get back to her.

I texted Patrick and a couple other friends several weeks after I stopped hearing from Melanie, once the gauntness started to return to my face and I didn't feel like eating again. *Anyone want to come over and drink with me, it's pretty sad if I'm alone.* Rarely was I so honest. They responded pretty quickly, in classic fashion for them. *As long as I would provide the booze,* they said.

Marc came over first either because of his proximity or enthusiasm to drink, carrying a six pack of some local beer that made me feel like I wasn't insightful enough to enjoy it. One was missing.

"Sorry, I already started. Hope you don't mind." He sat on the couch without taking off his jacket.

"Did you drive?"

"What do you think I am, an idiot? I walked." I thought that he must have run here, having arrived so quickly, but I respected his intention of safety.

Ray and Patrick lived together so they came at once, empty handed, which was expected. We were all together by 9:30.

"It would be kinda funny to have a sleepover, like old times. Why don't adults have sleepovers ever?" I asked.

"Uh, yeah, they do," said Marc. "The people attending are expected to be having sex though. That's what makes it an adult sleepover."

“So adults can’t ever just have sleepovers where they stay up and talk about the sex they’re not having? Like old times, like in-”

“Yeah, that’s what we talked about back in fourth grade,” said Ray, jokingly, or at least I hoped he was joking. We laughed.

When we got our pizza, we had moved on to the assortment of half filled bottles of weird flavored vodka and wine people had left at my house. Marc was pretty blurry and the rest of us were tipsy but coherent. In fact, Patrick seemed too coherent. He didn’t seem different at all. He told us all about how he was trying to become a vegetarian while eating a slice of sausage pizza.

“How did you fuck up this bad, then?” Ray asked. “You took literally the most complete meal in the world without meat and added meat to it. You requested this pizza. Specifically.”

“I already feel bad,” said Patrick. “I’m still eating meat, but at least I feel guilty. Isn’t that a step?” We looked at him and considered. “No,” the three of us said.

Soon we had completely embraced the adult-but-not-THAT-kind-of-adult sleepover thing. We threw away the idea of playing hide-and-seek drunk in my small apartment which would have been completely impossible and just took turns playing video games. At one point, I stood on the couch and quoted Dead Poets Society.

“Why was that a thing we did in college?” said Ray.

“What?” asked Patrick, not taking his eyes off his game.

“Stand on the furniture,” I said. “At the same time of night whenever we would hang out as a group it was time to stand on the furniture. It just felt natural.” I fell into the couch from my perch. My butt fell just past Ray with my legs over his lap, and he pushed me off without

hesitating. “Get off me, dude,” he said. “Don’t be weird.” I looked at him, baffled for a second, but just said “Don’t make it weird. Wouldn’t have been weird if you didn’t make it weird.”

Marc was still apparently on college. “If I remember correctly, the furniture and ‘Oh Captain, my Captain’ was at, like, 2 am, though,” said Marc. “What is it, like, not even midnight?”

“Not even,” I said.

Perhaps the most adult part of the sleepover was how early most of it was. Marc was passed out on a couch by midnight. Ray sat on the couch and watched TV, some sort of trivia game. I was hungry again, and dipped the leftover crusts in the box in marinara sauce because I didn’t feel like making something new. Patrick sat across the table from me.

“You look pretty put together for having gotten here several hours ago,” I said.

He looked off into the distance before he spoke. “Yeah, I’ve been trying not to drink lately, actually.”

I put down the crust I was eating in the little puddle of sauce I had made. “I didn’t notice, dude.” I felt bad about it, too. How could I not have noticed? “Why didn’t you say something?”

“I don’t know. It’s fine. It’s kinda funny to watch you guys fall apart when I’m sober anyway. I mean, look.” He pointed to where Marc was asleep with his head on Ray’s leg. “When does something like that ever happen sober? If the two of them were walking down the street next to each other and touched hands it would be all ‘N-n-n-no homo, bro.’”

We laughed. “I mean, you saw how defensive Ray got when you sat on him before. I live with the guy,” he said. “I love him and all, but he really needs to lighten up sometimes.”

There was a snore from the couch. Ray was so invested in his show that he didn’t notice.

“That’s pretty cute actually,” I said.

Patrick picked up strawfuls of the vodka and coke he was drinking which, I realized now, must have just been coke. He let them go in little droplets on the waterproof tablecloth.

“Did you ever get your test results back from the doctor?” he asked.

I had forgotten I’d told him that. “No, not yet,” I said. “It’s probably an allergy or something.”

“That’s really shitty of them. It’s been weeks, right? At least a couple weeks.”

“Don’t worry about it.” It would have been so easy to just tell him then, but I was still deluded into thinking I could handle this alone.

Soon, Ray and Marc were both asleep. I was drunk, and felt that same compulsion from college to stand on the furniture, something about the energy from the people around you combining with a pent up energy inside, and it was definitely that magic time of night that made it all come together. Not wanting to wake up the others or break my neck falling off the table, I sat, but my leg shook violently.

“Being with my parents for the weekend really made me miss so many things, but it also reminded me just how much better it is being on my own. Like not being guilted into doing the most pointless shit for no reason other than family value,” Patrick said.

“I feel that. I never visit my parents, though, so I wouldn’t know,” I said.

“Not ever?”

“Rarely. I mean, they live in New Jersey, so that doesn’t help.”

“Watch it, I’m from New Jersey.” He laughed but he clearly wasn’t joking.

“I thought your family lived upstate.”

“Yeah, now. I grew up in New Jersey, though. I don’t know why everyone shits on it. I mean, at least we have personality.” We had known each other for over a year and I never knew where he was from. I was glad I remembered correctly where his parents lived, because I wasn’t even sure of that when I said it.

By 3:30 I was not so much drunk as just starting to hate myself. Since it was warm, Patrick and I talked on the balcony in an attempt to not wake up the others. I looked down at the roofs far below me and felt that same sick but excited feeling I always got when I stood there.

“Do you have any fears?” I asked. “Not big, abstract fears but, for example, I’m afraid of heights even though I stand out here all the time. I don’t know why.” I looked over and saw a woman a few windows away, smoking a cigarette in a thin nightgown and slippers.

“I’m kind of scared of the subway.” He had his elbows on the railing and was looking out across the city.

“You take the subway every day.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s not enough to stop me from taking it, just, you know the yellow line that you have to stand behind?” I nodded. “I stand, like, five feet behind it. It would be so easy for someone to just-” and he pushed his hands straight out from his body, and I saw an imaginary figure being sent sailing out into the dark.

“No one would actually do that though, probably.”

“Even if no one pushed me it would be so easy to fall in if you’re too close. The train is so big and so fast...” he shivered, whether genuinely or for effect I didn’t know. He sat down in the plastic chair in the corner. Even though the breeze was slight, I shivered, too.

“I don’t think when I first met you I would have expected you to be the type who’s afraid of public transportation.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He laughed.

“I don’t know. You just always seemed like this calm, confident figure. Almost fake confident. I really didn’t know how you did it.”

He raised his eyebrows at me but smiled anyway. “I guess part of me is always kind of doing a part for the kids. I want them to see me as an authority figure. But, I mean, when I met you, you were a firefighter, so there’s that.”

Now I laughed. “You know, that was probably the most exciting moment of my life.”

“Really?”

I put my elbows back on the railing behind me. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt so important or helpful since then.”

“I get that, that makes sense. But I also have to say, that’s kind of sad.” And he laughed, an involuntary giggle more childish than I’ve ever heard come from a grown man. It was so contagious that I couldn’t help but join him, but when it was over, I looked out and thought about how right he was.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t look so good.” I knew what he meant. Ever since Melanie had left weeks ago, I felt myself getting worse than I had been before. In an attempt to avoid it, I kept my eyes focused on a spot in the middle distance, one lighted window among dozens of black ones in the building across the street.

“Lately you just look kind of sickly and-”

“Gaunt?”

“Yeah, gaunt.” I managed to look over at him and he looked back with visible scrutiny and concern. I realized that I had never noticed what color his eyes were. I couldn’t see them now in the dark anyway. “You’re sick,” Patrick said, and with growing confidence, “Why are you keeping things from us?”

“Keeping it from you,” I said, giving myself away. We looked into my apartment and could see the tops of the others’ heads as they slept. I was silenced by a wave of gross, alien emotion, something like internal disgust and loneliness manifested in a tightness in my chest and a dryness in my mouth. I didn’t know how I could manage to be surrounded by my best friends and still feel so lonely. I heard him stand.

“What is it?” he asked.

“Nothing,” and then I realized I looked like a fool. “Not nothing. What’s physically wrong with me isn’t the problem. I’m the problem. I’m just starting to realize what a pathetic, lonely life I have.”

I realized that he was standing directly next to me. I thought maybe that was how we would stand forever, in mutual togetherness and silence. “I know how you feel,” he said. Quietly, awkwardly.

“At least you have a girlfriend.”

“It’s not about that. I still feel secluded and like I’m not going anywhere or dedicating myself to the things that are most important.” He trailed off. “We just need to be here for each other so things don’t get too bleak.” Patrick maybe wasn’t the most eloquent, but hearing him say that made me feel oceans better. The stupid, ugly emotions I felt switched to feelings of relief, but I still made the same tight face as before. He must have seen it in the faint light.



Without a word, Patrick stepped towards me and pulled me into a big hug. Big because I never realized how much taller he was than me, and I felt small, but I also felt safe. I didn't think I had ever hugged him straight on before, and it had the same parental feeling I imagined a small child must feel when being hugged by anyone bigger than them. Serene. Warm. Platonic and simultaneously earth-building. On the balcony, in the growing light of the morning on the horizon, I felt better. I felt, just a little, like I could be healed.