

Unmaking the Past

Someone was screaming in the parking lot. Austin leapt to his feet. Sleep-drunk, he stumbled his way to the window and peered through the blinds. It was Kyle and Terry again. They had turned domestic disputes into a sport. The cops had been called on them at least once, after their immediate neighbor heard one of them throwing something at the other. It turned out Terry was destroying an old China set to spite her partner. Austin had seen the set. It was in mint condition, prior to being destroyed. Back when they first moved into the apartment the couple had been very social with their neighbors. Austin had dinner with them, twice. He knew the China set was worth a lot. He had told them as much. It killed him inside to know that something so beautiful, and worth so much money, had been destroyed in a lover's quarrel. The set was older than both lover's lives combined. The history tied up in it was worth more than the useless passion of their relationship. But Kyle had hurt Terry. So, Terry took it as her right to destroy something that was of passing sentimental value to him. Kyle never really cared much about great-great-grandma's China set anyway. Austin did. He knew it had traveled from Europe to America with an immigrant family miraculously intact. He knew it had survived extreme deprivation, extreme want. The Great Depression among other things. It had been passed down through generations, surviving acrimonious family splits over disputed wills, because if the kids couldn't agree on anything else, they at least knew that's what grandma would've wanted. It had survived so much. But it couldn't survive love. In the end it had been swept up and thrown away like so much useless garbage. He had grown to dislike Terry and Kyle for their continuous noise pollution. But when he found out about the China his dislike had turned to hate. Jessica had always accused him of being mercenary. Of preferring money and things to people. Guilty as charged. That was just one of the reasons they had divorced.

He met Jessica in college. She transferred in his junior year. They had Western Lit together. Western Lit was an easy A, so long as you took it with Dr. Schweizer. Austin had saved that course for when he was working on some of the harder upper-level classes for his major. He always came early to class so he could claim the seat closest to the exit. The minute the lecture ended he bolted. He hated getting stuck in student bottleneck by the door. The first few classes, Eduardo, a soccer player from Brazil, very nice guy, sat next to him. Eduardo dropped the class, and his seat remained unclaimed, until the day Jessica walked in. She had enrolled late. Dr. Schweizer was playing a movie. A bad adaptation of a Shakespeare play. He had dimmed the lights, otherwise Austin would've been studying for one of the classes he actually cared about. Jessica came in late, a feminine silhouette caught between the gloom of the classroom and the bright noisy world of the hallway. She stepped inside and quietly closed the door behind her. Whatever scene was playing at that moment was dark. Austin could sense the newcomer straining to find a seat in the low light. He waved his hand and then pointed to the seat Eduardo had so recently vacated. She nodded in the dark and crept towards the empty seat as quietly as she could. She whispered thanks and sat down. Austin, curious to see what she looked like, turned his chair slightly in her direction. It was a swivel chair, bolted to the floor. He set his elbow on the desk and leaned his head on his hand. In the dark it would look like he was

watching the movie, but he was now at the perfect angle to see her any time there was enough light cast from the TV screen. The next scene took place during the day. She was a brunette. It was hard to tell the color of her eyes in the light. She was a little mousy. She stared wide-eyed at the screen, entranced by whatever was happening. She fidgeted a lot. She played with her braid, which hung over her left shoulder, the shoulder closest to him. He saw that her fingernails weren't painted, and that she wore lots of rings. When the class was over, Dr. Schweizer turned on the light. She squinted and blinked several times as her eyes adjusted. She was absolutely adorable in that moment. As it turned out, her eyes were hazel. The perfect eye color in Austin's estimation. He stayed late that day, to bring Jessica up to speed on what she had missed in class.

Austin and Jessica left the classroom, walking slowly down the hall, talking nonsense. They stopped at the door to Austin's next class. They chatted for as long as they could. He could see in her eyes that she wanted to continue the conversation. He had never wanted to skip class more in his life, but the professor had already seen him, and it was an important course for his degree. He felt a little better knowing that Western Lit was a Monday Wednesday Friday class. Better still, it was only Monday.

He smiled, "Well, see you Wednesday, if not before."

They parted. He watched her walk to the end of the hall. As she turned the corner, she looked back at him. There was a mutual interest for sure. She disappeared, and he walked into the classroom. He might as well have skipped because he couldn't concentrate on anything the professor said. He thought about her for fifty minutes and then was dismissed to move on to his next class. Monday was a busy day that semester.

After his third class of the morning, he had two hours of work-study. He worked for the School of Education and Psychology, primarily running tests through the old Scantron machine. That day was a slow day for work, so he spent the majority of the time trying to study.

After work-study he headed to the cafeteria. He and Ramey, his roommate and best friend since High School, ate lunch together every day they could, class schedule permitting. There was a table at the far end of the cafeteria they and another group of friends vied for. There was no animosity between the two groups, but it was understood that if either Austin or Ramey claimed the table first that this other collection of friends would sit somewhere else. If on the other hand any one of the other students, who were all theater majors, were already there, Austin and or Ramey would find another table. When Austin entered the cafeteria that day, he saw two people sitting at the table. At first, he thought the theater students had already staked their claim, but then he recognized Ramey's book bag sitting on the floor next to the blurry shape that turned out to be Ramey. He wasn't sure how he recognized the bag before his friend. Regardless, his prescription needed updating. As he approached the table, he saw that the other figure was a girl. As he got even closer, he realized it was Jessica. Ramey spotted Austin approaching and waved. Jessica turned in her seat. She smiled in recognition.

Austin sat down. There was a brief moment of awkwardness as everyone figured out that everyone already knew each other. As it turned out, Jessica also had a class with Ramey: Art Appreciation. They too had hit it off. Both Austin and Ramey wondered if the other was as taken

by her as he was. They both recognized the same concern in the other, though they did their best to hide it.

The conversation faltered for a moment after Austin arrived. It didn't take long for it to pick up again. Ramey spotted one of the theater kids eyeing the table and drew everyone's attention to it. They explained the situation to Jessica, with mock seriousness. It was quickly decided that she too would save the table for them when she arrived first. Three was better than two. It would dramatically increase their odds of claiming the desired table. The three became fast friends.

As the spring semester slowly passed, both Austin and Ramey wondered if they should talk about their mutual interest in Jessica. Spring Break arrived and they headed back to their hometown. They only hung out once during the whole break. With every lull in the conversation Austin would assume one of them would blurt out that they had a thing for her. It never happened. Surely it would've been better to get it out in the open. It hung around each of their necks like an iron yoke. Maybe they were afraid to admit what they were feeling. Maybe they were worried what it might do to their friendship. In retrospect, Austin wasn't sure what his motivations for keeping it quiet were. He wasn't sure if he knew what they were then. Maybe they just hoped if they never talked about it, the situation would resolve itself.

He wondered what Jessica was thinking. She must've known they were both interested in her. She always acted like she didn't, but there was no way she couldn't see the signs. It must've been just as hard on her as it was on them, if not more so. It was youthful ignorance perhaps, on the part of Austin, and Ramey for that matter, to assume she would end up with one of them, instead of the dozen other young men vying for her attention. But Austin could see the signs too. There were moments when he was absolutely convinced she was crazy about him, which filled him with happiness for himself and sorrow for his friend. There were other moments when he knew for sure that she was in love with Ramey, which filled him with joy for his friend and desperate sadness for himself. Whatever happened, no one wanted to hurt anyone.

The semester continued to roll on. Despite the general confusion on the romantic front, they were all still having a good time. When the Spring dance came Jessica suggested the three of them go together. Austin wondered how that would work when it came time for slow dancing. Nonetheless, both he and Ramey agreed.

Austin drove. His car had more room and in general was cleaner than Ramey's. When they arrived at the country club the school had rented, Jessica stood between them. The three of them linked arms and walked inside. Just as in the cafeteria they claimed a corner of the dance floor. They danced with everyone who happened into their orbit, friends, strangers, and casual acquaintances. The only time they left the floor was for water or for the bathroom. When the slow dance tunes came on Ramey or Austin would take Jessica in their arms and sway slowly back and forth. She didn't seem to mind that they were taking turns with her. Meanwhile the other would either head for the restroom or ask the nearest girl if she wanted to dance. At one point Ramey ended up slow dancing with two girls at once. They held hands in a circle and took turns twirling each other. The girls were friends, but Ramey had never met them before.

After the dance was over Ramey and Austin lay in their beds, recounting the events of the evening to each other, adding new elements to the other's story, embellishing on occasion, collectively remembering everything that had happened in the hopes this would crystalize the memories so they would never fade. Eventually, Ramey fell asleep. Austin lay awake for almost an hour. When sleep teased but continued to evade, he finally gave up on it, as the unfaithful slattern that it was. He crept out of bed, quietly as he could, dressed, and went out for a walk.

The moon was near full. The campus was quiet. He plugged in his earbuds. He walked across the campus lawns, up and down the immaculate sidewalks, admiring the well-kept foliage. He walked past the noisy fountain, past the austere but gorgeous architecture, through the secret arbors, the forgotten places, the hidden world of the school that leapt to life at night.

His skin tingled as he pushed the window open to Haidt Hall. It was a window to the men's room in a remote corner of the building. He made a point to make sure it was unlocked. He walked through the halls, in and out of classrooms, in and out of a few careless professor's offices. He walked through a door which he knew had no alarm and made his way towards the girl's dorm.

All he could think about the entire night was Jessica. He distracted himself with whatever he could find, his friend, the campus, breaking and entering. She followed him wherever he went and brought new life into everything he encountered. He had planned to end his evening excursion outside her dorm; to look up with longing at her darkened room. Whereupon he'd return to his own room and hopefully pass out until morning. Instead, he found her sitting on a brick half-wall, staring up at the moon. She turned to him. He pulled his headphones out of his ears. His curated soundtrack ended. Night, and all its accompanying music swept in to fill the void. How could it possibly be that the girl he had been thinking of for hours, should suddenly appear like this before him? She stood. She wordlessly approached and took his hand. She led him down a grassy knoll, past the soccer practice field, through a clump of trees, into a moonlit meadow on the outskirts of campus. In the middle of the meadow, she turned and looked back at him. His heart was beating so hard he thought it would kill him. She knew where she was going. She had wanted this all along. He was so overwhelmed with passion and longing he could barely think. He barely knew where he was. Then all at once they were in a grove on the outside of the meadow. She pushed him up against a tree, kissing him hard. It was difficult to say what transpired next, but he found himself flat on his back in the grass, the moon looking down at him through a tangle of leaves. She lay on top of him only for a moment before he rolled and pressed her into the ground. And so it went, for who could say how long. Until their passion was spent and they lay clinging to each other beneath a sleepy magnolia.

They woke at sunrise, shivering in the dew. They turned to each other. Happy, though somehow slightly ashamed. Afraid of what the other was thinking, feeling. Jessica smiled first, assuring him that everything was all right. With that assurance he pulled her close once again. They watched the sun rise through the trees, huddling together for warmth in the coolness of the early morning.

How could something so beautiful turn into such bitterness? Austin blinked away the memory and once again found himself peeking through the window at Terry and Kyle. He wondered if he and Jessica had been that loud when they argued. He retroactively felt bad for their neighbors. They had lived in an apartment complex too. A lot nicer than the one he was living in now.

He turned away from the window and started towards the kitchen. He was wide awake now. He needed a second nightcap to get back to sleep. He didn't know how anyone could sleep unmedicated. He took his drink back to his bedroom and laid down. The muted argument continued to rage outside. He and Jessica had several screaming matches. Not as many as Kyle and Terry. He wondered why they continued to hold on, to try. After every resolution there was another honeymoon period. They had worked through their issues, and their love came out stronger on the other side. Until the next blow up. They had to know it was coming. No matter how happy they were after they made up, the next fall out had to be hanging in the back of their mind, like an oracle of woe. Austin wasn't sure if he admired them for their tenacity or hated them for holding on to a pipe dream. At that precise moment in time, he just wanted to get some sleep. He thought about submitting a noise complaint, but decided against it. He turned on his noise machine, turning the dial up until the voices outside had been drowned out.

He thought back to his relationship with Jessica, trying to trace when it had gone sour as he had done so many times before. He could never pinpoint a specific moment. It was a gradual erosion. Small issues, small slights that had been left unresolved, slowly cutting away, carving deeper and deeper resentments. There was less grace the next time fault was admitted. The next stinging comment was left unforgiven, or never even apologized for. A reservoir was being drained. It wasn't long before it was empty. When larger issues rose, there was nothing to fall back on. No affection. No love to help them forgive. All they had were good memories, but the present drained the past of all its joy. The past made the present even worse. It reminded them they had lost something that they could never get back. The disagreements turned into arguments then turned into shouting. He remembered the screaming the best, though he was much more curious about all the quiet moments that had led up to them. Had they been tended to properly, maybe the whole thing wouldn't have fallen apart. That was just wishful thinking. He knew he was at fault too, but something about her had changed. She wasn't the same person he had married. He knew that was a common complaint, a cliché even. But somewhere in the years between their wedding and their divorce she had gone cold and unfeeling. It didn't just naturally fall apart over time. She had wanted it to. She had been working towards it. He wasn't at all surprised when he found out about the affair.

When the truth finally came out, he wasn't angry, he was relieved. They could finally stop pretending. She confessed almost casually, as though she were just filling him in on something amusing that had happened that day. He had asked her if she had gone to the HOA meeting, to which she replied no. Then she told him what she *had* been doing. Immediately after she told him he walked into the kitchen to make a drink. Out of habit he asked her if she wanted anything. He made them both Vodka Tonics and then stepped out on to the back patio. He sipped his drink slowly, wondering what he should do. Should he fight to preserve his marriage? He

turned and saw her watching him through the window. The marriage didn't seem worth saving. But the memory of what they had once been did. They were just kids when they had fallen in love. It seemed like such a horrible thing to let those two kids down. To give up on the dream they had woven together. To give up on their happy future. Jessica turned and disappeared into the house. He filed for divorce the day after.

In the end he felt most guilty about the collateral damage. Family and friends were inevitably dragged in to the fray. His sisters had loved Jessica. It hurt them almost as much as him to see their relationship fall apart. In truth, given his general state of apathy during the divorce proceedings, it had hurt them more. Friends had to decide who they would side with. Cynically, Austin assumed it was just a good opportunity for friends to pick who they actually liked the best. It seemed to have very little to do with who was at fault. Austin thought it was reasonable to think the fault primarily lay with Jessica. At least he assumed that's how people looking in from the outside would view things, given that she was the one who had the affair. Quite a few of their friends didn't seem to think so. He could do without them anyway. The only one that hurt was Ramey.

His alarm shattered a pleasant dream about fighting a gang who was attacking him and an attractive woman who looked vaguely like Ingrid from work. He shut off his alarm and stared into his phone for half a minute before he threw it back on to his side table. He didn't have to get up as early that day, given that he had taken the day off and his flight wasn't until later that afternoon. He had thought it best to get up at his normal time and get some cleaning done around the apartment. After the late night and the second night cap he wished he had shut his alarm off and slept in a little.

He made himself coffee and scrambled eggs for breakfast. He liked ketchup on his eggs. Jessica thought that was gross. She preferred salsa. His coffee never tasted as good as hers. He never figured out what he was doing wrong. It was still coffee, and it would have to do. Breakfast, or brunch, as the case may be, was the only meal he and Jessica cared about. They had their share of romantic dinners. A few pleasant lunch breaks in the park next to where she used to work. But breakfast, specifically weekend breakfasts, were all important.

He thought back to the morning after the spring dance. They watched the sunrise. Then all at once reality kicked in. They kissed a hasty goodbye and ran back to their dorms. Austin fared better than Jessica. No one was awake. Ramey lay face down in his pillow so still that Austin was worried he'd suffocated. When Austin touched his shoulder Ramey abruptly rose into sphinx pose, blinked a few times, and then laid back down. Austin took a quick shower, dressed, and then headed towards the dining hall. Jessica hadn't been so lucky. Returning to her dorm in crumpled formal wear attracted quite a lot of attention. It didn't matter. Her roommate had been up for half an hour, already showered, deep into her morning makeup routine. She arched an eyebrow in Jessica's direction as she entered the room.

“Long night?”

“In the best kind of way.”

Jessica's clothes slipped off haphazardly in various places in the room as she made her way to the shower. She didn't wait for the water to get warm. She squealed loudly as she stepped into a spray of cold water. She soaped up quickly, even washed her hair. She paused just for a moment once the water turned hot, letting it warm her up. The night had been cold, even in his arms. She shut the water off, stepped out of the shower, wrapped her head in one towel and her body in another and walked into the room. She threw underwear, sweater, and jeans on the bed, which were followed shortly after by her towels. She pulled on her clothes and rushed to the bathroom sink since her roommate was still occupying the vanity. She threw on some mascara and a touch of concealer. She was happy with her lips. She rushed out of her room. Hair still wet. Roommate still preparing for the day.

She found Austin at their table in the far corner of the dining hall. He had made her a waffle in the little waffle machine. A tiny thread of steam rose from its golden-brown crosshatch. There was a pile of fresh blueberries on it. A tiny metal saucer of syrup. Two sausage links on the side. A mug of hot coffee with a dash of half-n-half. She walked to the table and sat down, so full of joy she could burst. She looked into his eyes. She almost felt ashamed of how happy she was. This kind of sentimental crap wasn't supposed to happen in real life. But there he was, waiting for her with the perfect breakfast after the perfect night. She reached out and took his hand. They studied each other for a long time. They didn't start eating until Ramey showed up. He had seen them holding hands. They had pulled away too late, blushing.

That was how she told the story. For his part, after he had made sure Ramey wasn't dead, he headed to the cafeteria. He went through the line accepting his large scoop of scrambled eggs, or whatever they were. They looked like eggs, and they tasted similar, but they weren't eggs. At the very least, there was some kind of filler in there and he never figured out what it was. After he collected his breakfast, he made hers. He never had the patience to wait in line to use the tiny waffle machine for himself. She loved waffles, so he waited. He sat at the table for a long time, fidgeting. He remembered her walking in, eyes bright, hair still wet from her shower. She had never looked so beautiful before or since. This vision could be walking into the cafeteria to meet anyone. But she was headed straight towards him. The joy in her eyes was something they had made together. How beautiful it was to be young and in love. He remembered feeling stupid about the overflow of emotion he was feeling that morning. But he had never been happier. A full and bountiful breakfast was laid out before them, but they sat holding hands and staring into each other's eyes. Until Ramey appeared and they pulled apart. As though loving each other was something to be ashamed of. He felt resentful just for a moment. Until he looked up at Ramey and saw the sadness in his friend's eyes. Then he felt ashamed. Even though he shouldn't. She had finally made her choice. Ramey said good morning, took his seat, and started into his bowl of cereal. Austin and Jessica ate their own breakfast. It had gone cold.

Austin was worried things would be awkward between the three of them. As it turned out it was only awkward between him and Ramey. When the three of them were together everything went smoothly. They all hung out as before. They ate their meals together, studied together, skipped classes together. Everything seemed to be normal. But when it was just Austin and Ramey, Ramey immediately went quiet. There was a sadness about him. They tried to maintain

an air of normalcy, but it never really worked. When they were in their dorm room together, Ramey would plug in his headphones and isolate himself in music. Austin started studying in the library. It wasn't long before Ramey started asking seemingly innocent questions that were clearly meant to segway into Austin admitting that he and Jessica were a couple. Austin never took the bait. He and Jessica hadn't defined the relationship. Even though Jessica found as many if not more excuses for the two of them to be alone, Austin was still worried that somehow he had misunderstood something. Regardless, he felt guilty for not telling Ramey right away. He felt like he was betraying his best friend. They had been inseparable since middle school, and now he felt ashamed every time he was around him.

The week of finals came. Austin was worried about how he'd fare in Western Lit, since every time he and Jessica met to study for it they ended up making out. At his insistence they started studying with a few other classmates so they could actually get some work done. The final came and went and all of Austin's fears were put to rest. It ended up being the easiest test of the semester.

After Western Lit Austin had two more finals. One for Introduction to Philosophy, which he had with both Ramey and Jessica, and one for Research Methods which he had with Ramey. Jessica signed up for Intro to Philosophy after she met them. It was the very last day she could change classes. Austin and Ramey had brought her up to speed. She never took notes. She just made photocopies of theirs. Throughout the semester they coordinated their skip days so that one of them was always in class. When it was Jessica's turn she copied someone else's notes. After that Austin and Ramey made sure that one of them was always there.

The Intro to Philosophy final was on a Wednesday evening at 6:00. Research Methods was the following morning at 11:00. Austin and Ramey had made plans for a final cram session Thursday morning. The three of them met for an early dinner to finish studying for the Intro final. A few review questions in they collectively decided it wasn't necessary and started talking about several baseball players who had been suspended for bringing a keg into the dorms.

In the classroom there was an air of excitement. It was the last final for many. Graduation was on Friday and a few years prior the school had implemented a policy where no finals could be scheduled later than 12:00 PM the day before Graduation. If Research Methods hadn't been scheduled for Thursday at 11:00, Austin and Ramey would have been done too. It took a full minute or so before the Professor could get everyone to quiet down enough that he could go through the house rules. As his TA handed out the exams, he reminded everyone not to cheat, that they had an hour to complete the test, that merely writing one's name on the appropriate line was worth five points, and that when they were finished they should walk out of the room quietly, leaving their finished test on his desk.

Austin and Ramey had made bets on which one of them would finish first. A few questions in Austin regretted making the bet. He was so anxious to win that he was forgetting simple terms and concepts. He glanced up at Ramey who was laser focused on the exam. Austin stared at him for a while, trying to get him to look up at him, to break his concentration. It didn't work. Eventually Austin decided that Ramey was going to win. Which immediately calmed him

down and made the test significantly easier. Ramey did win, but not by much. Austin was finished roughly two minutes later.

Ramey was waiting for him in the hall. As Austin stepped out Ramey held up his hand. Austin gave him a high five as hard as he could. It reverberated through the hallway. It also hurt like hell. They laughed and started chatting, until dirty looks from the TA chased them away. Ramey's face was lit up. The infectious joy of the semester end had taken hold of him. They talked about the test, about confusing questions, about Austin trying to distract Ramey, about how Ramey had barely remembered Plato's definition of the good life. Their conversation was so free and so natural that it felt like all the awkwardness of the last month and a half had been completely erased. It was concluded with Ramey announcing he had to go use the bathroom. Which meant he had to trek across campus to the only one clean enough for his use.

Austin blinked. He hated thinking about that night. He took his last bite of eggs, stood, and carried his dirty dishes to the sink. He thought about leaving them there. But that would mean he'd have to come back to a dirty apartment. He turned on the faucet and held his fingers under the tap. It always took forever for the water to get hot. His thoughts slowly drifted back to his conversation with Ramey after the test, and the evening after.

"What do you want to do tonight?"

Austin shrugged, "I don't know. I kind of feel like wandering campus."

"That sounds good to me. I was going to wait to tell you this, but..."

Ramey leaned in closer.

"I've got a fifth of whiskey in my backpack."

Austin's eyes lit up, "Well then, I know exactly what I want to do. I want the three of us to wander campus and drink that bottle."

Ramey looked worried, "All of it?"

Austin shook his head, "No, just as much as we can responsibly drink tonight. We've got Research Methods tomorrow."

"Right, we're still studying tomorrow morning over breakfast, right?"

"Most definitely."

"Cool, well, I'm off to Frazier Hall, text me whenever y'all are ready."

"Will do."

Ramey walked briskly away. Austin turned and peeked into the classroom. Jessica was still bent over her test, deep in concentration. Austin sat down in a chair in the hallway and started looking over his Research Methods notes. A few minutes later he heard Jessica's voice from inside the classroom.

“Summer starts now.”

She said it to the professor as she deposited her test on his desk, but she said it loud enough for many in the class to hear. There was a ripple of laughter among the students and one even cheered. They were quickly shushed by the TA, who took everything much more seriously than the professor did.

Austin and Jessica shared a high-five, not quite as dramatic as Austin and Ramey’s, but still loud, therefore still satisfying. They walked down the hallway, commiserating over the test. Austin resisted the temptation to grab her hand. When they were finished talking about the test, Austin moved on to his and Ramey’s plan for the rest of the evening. After he was finished talking, Jessica stopped, turned, and looked up at him, eyes full of suggestion.

“I thought we might pay a visit to the grove.”

She started walking again and Austin followed. He was torn. A trip to the grove was something he most definitely wanted to do. At the same time, he didn’t want to delay meeting Ramey, especially when things seemed to have improved between the two of them. There would be time for the grove after a walk around campus.

“I want to do that. Very badly. But maybe we could hang out with Ramey for a bit and then head out to the grove?”

Jessica didn’t like that idea, “How would we get away?”

“I mean, you could just say you’re tired and I’ll offer to walk you back to the dorm.”

“It’ll be too obvious what’s really going on.”

“Really? I don’t think so.”

“Trust me it will. We’ll just go tomorrow night.”

Now it was Austin’s turn not to like that idea, “Well, maybe we could head to the grove and...”

He ended with a shrug. Jessica stopped and looked up at him. She was upset, insulted.

“And what? A quicky and then we go hang out with Ramey?”

Up until then all Jessica and Austin had done was make out. When she mentioned the word “quicky,” everything changed. She had made plans for the evening and Austin was ruining them. But what could he tell Ramey? Jessica stepped backwards into what had once been a small alcove with a payphone. She was out of sight of everyone but him. She held up her purse, reached in, and pulled up a part of lacy, blue panties. He looked down at her skirt. She nodded. The time for conversation was over. His heart started pounding heavily. He struggled to control himself lest he have to carry his backpack in front of him like he did in junior high. He forgot Ramey and followed her dumbly out of the hall, across campus, and into the grove. Somewhere in the walk Austin was vaguely aware of his phone buzzing in his pocket. He ignored it.

It was three in the morning before Austin made it back to his room. It took him an embarrassingly long time to figure out how to put the condom on. Then between his nervousness and the cheap condom dulling the sensation, it almost didn't seem worth it. Eventually they finished. The whole thing had been a lot more awkward than Austin had anticipated, which led to an equally awkward walk back to Jessica's dorm. They talked briefly, kissed, and then said they'd text in the morning.

When Austin walked into his room, Ramey wasn't there. The fifth of whiskey sat on Ramey's desk, unopened. Alcohol was forbidden in the dorms. And Ramey was a timid sort of fellow. The bottle on the desk seemed like a fuck you to Austin. Maybe he was reading too much into it. But when Ramey didn't come back the rest of the night, and when he didn't show up at breakfast to study, Austin knew that he wasn't. Austin wasn't too proud to admit that he wouldn't have made it through Research Methods without Ramey. He was the one who needed the study session, not his missing roommate.

Austin crammed as best he could the rest of the morning. When he walked into class Ramey wasn't in his usual spot. He was sitting on the opposite side of the room in between two strangers. He didn't look up when Austin walked in. A mixture of guilt at deserting Ramey and anger at him for being so childish about it welled up in Austin. It was topped off by a feeling of shame and disappointment about what had happened the night before. The first time was not what he had expected it would be. He took his seat and struggled through the test. Back in the dorm he and Ramey had their first fight since junior high.

Austin stood in his kitchen, brooding over that fight, wishing he had insisted he and Jessica meet Ramey for the end of semester celebration. Who knows how she would've reacted though. She would've seen it as rejection. What would that have done to their relationship? Maybe it would've ended sooner. Perhaps he could have spared himself the tortuous years wherein their relationship slowly crumbled. Maybe he could've spared them the messy divorce. On the other hand, what relationship woes would he have brought upon himself by choosing Ramey? He'd probably be standing at the sink all these years later, regretting that he hadn't gone to the grove with Jessica. He blinked and realized he'd been holding his hands under the hot water for several minutes. Dishes unwashed, he shut the water off and dried his hands. None of it really mattered at this point. He still got a B+ in Research Methods.

He double and triple checked his bags. He hated flying, or rather, he hated the airport and airport security. It felt like standing in a Soviet breadline. He hated waiting to board. The only good part about flying, outside of being able to travel cross country in a day, was walking off the plane.

He checked the oven and the stove. Everything was off. He checked the bathroom. The toilet wasn't running. The sink wasn't dripping. He checked the thermostat. He unplugged everything. He stood for a moment in the living room, running through a mental checklist. Satisfied that everything had been taken care of he stepped outside, locking the door behind him.

On the way to the airport, he thought back to the summer after his fight with Ramey. It had been awkward at first. Eventually they smoothed things over, and he finally admitted that he

and Jessica were dating. Although, he still didn't have permission to call her his girlfriend. That privilege wouldn't be granted until the following semester. Austin admitted that he had snuck off with Jessica after the Intro to Philosophy exam. He was careful to tell the story in such a way so that it sounded like they had just made out. Austin was pretty sure telling Ramey that he had been stood up by his best friend and the girl he was crushing on so they could have sex would be rubbing salt in the wound.

Time passed. The three remained good friends throughout college. They all graduated. Austin and Jessica magna cum laude. Ramey summa. Austin proposed. She said yes. Ramey agreed to be his best man. Ramey and Jessica landed their dream jobs. Austin didn't, though he ended up with a decent alternative. Everything seemed to be going well.

Years passed. Relationships soured. Jessica sought emotional and physical fulfillment elsewhere. Two years of dating and six years of marriage flushed down the drain. One of his sisters blamed him. The other one blamed Jessica. They had several heated arguments about it with each other in Austin's presence. They felt much more strongly about the whole thing than he did. His parents were upset, though his mother thought it was inevitable. She had never liked Jessica. His father liked Jessica more than him. Jessica's father had long since passed. After Austin filed for divorce, he never talked to his former mother-in-law again. All family division and awkwardness over the divorce eventually healed itself. Friendships were another story.

The Friday after the divorce was finalized, he and Ramey went out for drinks. They barely spoke. They spent the evening staring at their phones or whatever TV screen was nearest at the bar. It was March Madness, and Ramey spent most of the time watching whatever game was on, even though he'd never kept up with Basketball of any kind. As they sat opposite each other in the booth, struggling to find things to talk about, Austin realized he and Ramey hadn't hung out alone since he got married. Jessica had always been there. If it wasn't Jessica, it was some other mutual friend. He hadn't realized how far they'd drifted apart. A lump formed in his throat as he wondered what he and Ramey had lost when he and Jessica snuck away that night. It always came back to that night. He finally confessed his regrets.

"I should've texted you after the exam."

Ramey turned to him, "What?"

"The night after the Intro to Philosophy test. I shouldn't have gone with her."

Ramey shrugged, "What difference does that make now?"

"It doesn't I just... I've been spending a lot of time lately playing 'what if?'"

Ramey shrugged again, "A man could go crazy doing that. I should know."

It was the only meaningful conversation they had had so far. They both knew it. Neither of them knew how to sustain it. They barely spoke another word to each other at the bar. Finally, they mutually decided it was time to leave. As a matter of form, Austin invited Ramey back to his apartment. He was surprised and disappointed when Ramey accepted. It was too late to

rescind the invitation. Ramey hadn't been to his new apartment yet. Austin texted him the address.

Ramey started out following Austin. Austin quickly discovered that Ramey drove too slowly. Which annoyed him more than it should've. He lost him at a red light. It didn't matter. Ramey had his address and GPS. Austin pulled into the parking lot, shut off his car, and walked up to his apartment. He fumbled for his keys in the dark, mentally kicking himself for not turning on his porch light before he left. He stepped inside and checked his fridge for beer. He was well stocked. He checked his liquor cabinet. There was whiskey, vodka, and spiced rum, that would do. Ten minutes passed. What was taking so long? He prepared himself a drink, secretly hoping Ramey had decided he wasn't going to come over after all. He eagerly waited for the text. Another five minutes later and Ramey knocked on his door. Ramey stepped inside, apologizing for how long it had taken, claiming the GPS had taken him a strange way. Austin shrugged and said something dismissive. He asked if Ramey wanted anything to drink. Ramey asked for something Austin didn't have. Ramey took a whiskey and tonic instead. Combining whiskey and tonic water seemed strange to Austin, but maybe it wasn't. What did he know?

They took their drinks to the living room, where Ramey walked around, looking at the décor. He pointed out a poster that Austin had in college. Austin smiled and mumbled something about Jessica not letting him put it up in their apartment. Ramey went silent again. He continued walking around the room. He knelt by the entertainment center and perused Austin's movies.

"I think this was mine."

"Which one?"

"Alphaville."

"Oh yeah. I think I borrowed that at the end of senior year. Sorry about that. Do you want it back?"

"Umm, yeah actually if you don't want it. I just noticed it but, yeah, I wouldn't mind getting it back if that's cool."

"Yeah, definitely, go for it."

Ramey picked up the movie and dropped it on the side table where he had left his keys. He walked around the room, slowly sipping his drink, looking at everything a second time. He finally settled on to the old couch they had shared in college.

"I wonder how many times I slept on this couch."

Austin smiled, "More times than you slept in your bed."

"Probably. It was more comfortable."

"I remember when I left it at Justin's place over the summer. He said he slept on it a couple of times."

“It’s a good couch. You didn’t have it at your,” Ramey faltered, “Other apartment, did you?”

“No, it was in storage. It was another old college relic she didn’t appreciate.”

Ramey nodded. He set his glass on the floor and laid down, staring up at the ceiling. He was quiet for a long time.

“I was thinking that it was *Alphaville* that she snuck into the dorm to watch with us. But it wasn’t. It was *Weekend*.”

“Another Godard movie.”

“Yep. I didn’t like that one very much.”

“None of us did. It started out great, but after a great opening it just kind of…”

Austin shrugged in conclusion. Ramey nodded in agreement.

“I’m amazed she never got caught in the dorms,” Ramey murmured. “We watched so many movies in there.”

“She did once. But the RA was too tired to care. He just told her to leave. So, she climbed out the window she’d climbed in.”

“Mooney was our RA then, wasn’t he?”

“Yep.”

“Pretty sure he was sneaking his girlfriend in at the time himself.”

“Probably.”

Ramey went quiet again. He stared up at the ceiling, musing. He smiled to himself, remembering something. Then his face went dark.

“So, what happened with Jessica?” His tone was accusing.

What did happen with Jessica? Austin stared down at the floor. He had never noticed how stained the carpet was. He looked up and found that Ramey was staring at him. He expected an answer. Austin sighed deeply.

“I don’t know, Ramey. I mean I do, but… our relationship had been dying a slow death for a very long time. I’ve been trying to figure out when that started but, I can’t think of anything. It’s like it just happened. It’s as though it suddenly got sick with a terminal illness, and then lingered far longer than it should’ve. But I don’t know when it got sick.”

Ramey wasn’t satisfied by that response. He turned sharply away from Austin and looked up at the ceiling. He sat up abruptly, downed his drink, and stood. He looked down at Austin for a moment. Austin stared up at him, a little fearful. There was a lot of anger in Ramey’s face.

Austin wasn't used to it. Ramey walked past him into the kitchen and made himself another drink. He returned to the couch, though he didn't sit down.

"I think that's bullshit."

Austin was more annoyed than offended, "How is that bullshit?"

"You gave up on her and she knew it. You didn't think your relationship was worth the effort. You didn't think she was worth it."

Austin's ears pricked up. Had she and Ramey been talking behind his back?

"She told you this?"

"She didn't have to. It's obvious."

"How is it obvious? Were you talking to her while we..."

"We weren't talking about you. We never talked about you. It was written on her face. You stopped caring."

It was true he had. But he was absolutely certain that she had as well. It was entirely possible she had stopped caring before him. He didn't appreciate Ramey's accusatory manner.

"So did she. I can't tell you how many times I would try to rekindle things. I'd buy flowers. I'd plan trips. I'd do extra chores. I never got anything out of her. She was distant. And I don't remember exactly when it started, but she was never really there. I mean when it starts you just think, 'oh, she's tired,' or 'she had a long day.' You don't think she's fallen out of love with you. You just move on."

Ramey was still not satisfied. He paced back in forth in front of the couch, searching for words.

"Stop pacing."

Ramey didn't stop. Anger was coloring Austin's annoyance. It was Austin's turn to be accusatory.

"If you knew something was going on, why didn't you say something? Why didn't you stoop to tell me my marriage was falling apart?"

"Why should I have to explain what's going on in your marriage to you? You never understood her. Not even in college. God knows why..."

Ramey trailed off. It was obvious what he was thinking. "God knows why she didn't pick me." After all these years, he was still stuck on her. Austin thought back to what he had said earlier that evening. Something about going crazy playing "what if." Ramey had been playing that game since that morning in the cafeteria when he saw them holding hands. That was the fateful moment for Ramey. When all his hopes and daydreams were struck down and he was relegated to permanent "third wheel."

Austin finished his thought: “God knows why she didn’t pick you.”

Ramey sat down on the couch, clutching his drink, like penitents clutch a crucifix. He was daydreaming again. Living all the moments he could have had with her. Living all the moments Austin lived and had thrown away. Ramey had never dated in high school, college, or after. She was the one. The only one.

He finally spoke.

“I could’ve made all those memories with her. We, she and I, could’ve shared all of those moments. And I would’ve kept them. I remember how you two used to be. I remember two kids stupid in love. Don’t you feel bad for them?”

Austin blinked back a few tears, “Yes. I do.”

“Then why’d you let it go?”

Austin sat stewing in his remorse for a minute or so, before he remembered all the years of living with a woman who was nothing like that fresh-faced beauty they had both loved. He had fallen in love with a dream of a woman. He had married her. Somewhere in the hazy passage of time she had changed into something entirely different. Something cold, and hard. Maybe she had always been that way, and he was too drunk with love, or hormones, to know it. She had remained an angel to Ramey. She had become something entirely different to him. Maybe you had to get close to her to really see it. Then again maybe it wasn’t her at all. Maybe he was just an unlovable piece of shit.

Ramey distracted Austin from his internal torpor of emotional angst by verbalizing some of his own.

“It could’ve been me you know. I did see her first after all.”

Austin almost chided him for misogyny. One couldn’t claim a woman because they “saw her first” after all. He didn’t of course. He would’ve thought and felt the same thing. Nonetheless, he wasn’t sure if Ramey was correct on that point.

“I don’t think you did actually.”

He shouldn’t have bothered. It was a useless and immature point to belabor.

“I did. We had Biology together. I mentioned her to you. Then when she and I were eating lunch a few days later you showed up after you had... British Lit?”

“Western Lit... When did you mention her?”

“She was the girl I talked about the night before.”

Austin searched his memory, trying to find any trace of this conversation. Ramey had talked about a lot of girls. There was no way he could have known that Ramey meant her in one of their many, many conversations about girls in the dark of night in their dorm room.

Austin lied partially, “I didn’t know it was her.”

“It doesn’t really matter anymore does it.”

Ramey was temporarily resigned to their respective fates. Then his resentment resurfaced.

“You stole her and now you’ve got all the happy memories. And I don’t have shit.”

A great and furious anger welled up in Austin. She was still an idol to Ramey. He wanted more than anything to tear that idol down. To tell him all the dirty things they had done to each other. Things no chaste little girl would do. He wanted to tell Ramey all the cruel things she had said to him. To tell him in detail about her cold indifference. About how vicious she truly was. He wanted to shatter his friend’s illusion. Somehow that in and of itself seemed cruel. He did his best to temper his response.

“The way I see it Ramey... I spared you. If things had turned out differently. I would’ve been saying this same shit to you.”

“Well now we’ll never know.”

“You’re right. You’ll never have to know that kind of disappointment.”

“I’m already disappointed.

They sat in silence for a long time. There was nothing more to be said. Ramey collected his things and without a word of goodbye, left. It had been a terrible evening. Austin drank until it was a blur.

The next day, outside of a few bathroom breaks, Austin stayed in bed until mid-afternoon. He wasn’t sleeping. He wasn’t depressed, at least not in the way he used to get depressed, back when he was an angsty teenager or college student. He couldn’t find a reason to move. He tried to think of places he could go. Of things he could do. Everything in the outside world either reminded him of her or a relationship that had soured because of her. She had ruined his hometown for him. There was nowhere he could go to escape her presence.

The day after, Sunday, he decided he couldn’t stay in his apartment forever. The weekend was almost over; he had to do something fun to redeem it. He went for a jog in the park. He passed several acquaintances he and Jessica had made. Fellow joggers and dog-walkers—the dog was one thing he had lost in the divorce that he did not miss. They all nodded politely or greeted him awkwardly. Somehow, they all knew he and Jessica had split.

He finished his run and headed home to shower. In the shower he thought of what he wanted for dinner. There was nothing in the apartment so he would either have to go grocery shopping or eat out somewhere, and he didn’t feel like cooking. Eating alone in a restaurant sounded depressing to him. He ran through the list of restaurants he liked for takeout. He and Jessica went to so many of them so often that the staff knew what they wanted before they even asked. One of the clerks even recognized his voice on the phone and would simply ask, “the usual?” Everywhere he liked to go, even for something as simple as takeout, people would know

what he had been through. Even the waiters, bartenders, and baristas would be taking sides. She was everywhere. Her presence was inescapable. A few months later when he was offered a job six hundred miles away, he immediately accepted.

Airport security flagged Austin after his x-ray. They squeezed the cuffs of his pant legs and patted his inner thighs. Satisfied that he wasn't a security risk they let him pass. He bought an overpriced bottle of water and headed for his terminal.

He hadn't been home in almost two years. The last time he'd gone back he and Ramey had made plans to meet each other for dinner, but they fell through at the last minute. This go around he hadn't let Ramey know he was going to be in town. He wondered whether he should at this point. It was pretty last minute, and he was only going to be in town for a few days. He should call or text. His family could spare him a few hours. He didn't call. He didn't text. He leaned back in his chair and stared blankly upward.

He tried to remember his conversation with Ramey. The one where Ramey had talked about Jessica. The conversation which meant she was off-limits for any romantic overtures. He had long since forgotten what was said. He had barely remembered it when Ramey had brought it up for the purpose of accusing him of stealing her. He had been innocent of any wrongdoing, not that Ramey could "claim" her to begin with. She had wandered into class and sat next to him. Sitting next to him was all it had taken to set off a chain of events that had forever altered all their lives. Nonetheless, he wondered if his memory was selective. What if he had always known? What if he had stolen her on purpose? He shook his head. He didn't know. He would never have done anything to hurt Ramey. Not on purpose.

He pulled out his phone and stared down at it. There was still time. Ramey could meet him somewhere for lunch maybe. He wondered what they would talk about. They could fill each other in on what had happened since the last time they had talked. When *was* the last time? A brief phone call the year before. He couldn't remember what was said. He knew Ramey was very busy, working for the city. Something to do with engineering. His phone sat like a brick in his hand. They called his boarding group. He put his phone in his pocket and got in line.