

This is not exactly the beginning of the story. I'll give you that later.

There is no rule saying that stories have to start at the beginning, is there?

I mean, the Bible has done pretty well with "In the beginning..." But that always seemed a little too on the nose for my liking. You know?

So let's start here...

We were in one of those doctors' offices -- the ones that are set up to be soothing. Piped in elevator music. Soft lighting. Plants. Weird fountain thing in the corner that just makes you want to pee. Constantly. Yes, it is supposed to be soothing.

But it never works.

I didn't even notice myself drumming on the armrest.

Melissa did.

She grabbed my hand and gave me a dirty look. She was even stunning when she was angry.

"We've been sitting here forever," I whined. In a manly way, of course.

"Brandon, it hasn't been that long," she replied, reading her magazine.

"You didn't make me wait this long to get you into bed when we first started dating."

Now looking at me. "Are you calling me a whore?"

"Noooo. Of course not."

I turned to the elderly gentleman sitting next to me -- who was seventy-five years old if he was a day -- and gave him the "a little bit" sign.

I started whistling but caught myself. I picked up the clipboard that was on the table in front of Melissa.

"Last time I filled out one of these, I couldn't find a spot to tell them about that pain in my ovaries," I whispered. "You know the one?"

Melissa took the clipboard out of my hand and put it back on the table.

"Dude, how old are these magazines?" I asked, as I scanned the available reading material.

"They aren't *that* old," she almost hissed.

"Wow! Check this out," I said excitedly. "Alec Baldwin and Kim Basinger are showing us their Y2K

shelter. Man, I hope those two crazy kids can make it work."

I crossed my fingers and smiled at her. She didn't even look up.

I glanced around the room. A thought struck, as they occasionally do.

"Hey, Melissa."

"Hey, what?"

"That elevator music... I think it's Mötley Crüe."

"What?," she asked.

"Mötley Crüe. The Crüe!"

She listened for a few moments.

"That's Brahms."

"Brahms? Did he play bass for The Crüe?"

"I'm going to need you to stop talking," she said forcefully, as she went back to her magazine.

"It's 'Dr. Feelgood.' They are playing 'Dr. Feelgood.'" Good choice, I suppose."

Melissa ignored me.

I started singing and, of course, not at all along with the music.

"Rat-tailed Jimmy is a secondhand hood. He deals out in Hollywood."

"Stop."

"Got a '65 Chevy, primed flames. Traded for some powdered goods," I continued, holding an invisible mic. As one would.

"Stop it."

"Jigsaw Jimmy, he's runnin' a gang. But I hear he's doin' OK."

I held the invisible mic out to the elderly gentleman, who didn't miss a beat.

"Got a cozy little job, sells the Mexican mob packages of candyaine."

I was floored.

"That was awesome, Old Dude."

Melissa grabbed my mic hand and pulled it down. She glared at me.

"Did you see that?" I asked incredulously.

"Be-have!"

"I'm sorry. Hey, where do you think this doctor went to school?"

Old Dude went back to his Sudoku.

"I don't know," she replied. "Why do you want to know?"

"I just don't think we should take the word of some dude who went to someplace like... Arizona State."

"Really?"

"Absolutely. No Sun Devils, I say! Their football team blows." I pronounced "blows" as if it had fourteen *o*'s.

"You want to pick a doctor based on the strength of the football team where they went to school?"

"You don't like?"

"You are driving me crazy."

A nurse arrived on the scene.

"Folks, the doctor will see you in a few moments," she said with a smile as she picked up the clipboard from the table. I resisted telling her about my past ovary troubles. I'm a bit sensitive about it.

"Can boyfriends go in too?" Melissa asked.

"Of course," the nurse replied and started to walk away. Then she turned around and added, "The Doctor went to John's Hopkins. But, his son goes to Ohio State, if that makes you feel any better."

"Hmm," I hmm'd, relatively satisfied.

I could see the color actually drain from Melissa's face as, once again, the reality of the situation hit her. She turned to me but I was already looking at her. I gave her a wink and then a smile.

A simple wink.

A simple smile.

And she couldn't help but smile back. I'm pretty adorable, really.

She knew what I'd been doing. While I do hate waiting -- and Arizona State -- this little show had been for her benefit. I would have done everything short of a striptease to keep her mind off of what was about to happen. I probably would have done a striptease too. And by "probably," I mean most likely. And by "most likely," I mean... I was already wearing the pasties. Kidding.

Probably.

I am a giant pain-in-the-ass goofball. But I am *her* giant pain-in-the-ass goofball, and she loves the crap out of me. Most of the time.

I leaned over and kissed her on the top of the head.

"I still think it's The Crüe."

She giggled in spite of herself and a little snort escaped.

The nurse returned. "Dr. Chase will see you now."

We were led down a dark hallway to the doctor's inner office. I allowed Melissa to enter first. We each took a seat in the empty room.

I took her hand. She managed a weak smile.

I leaned in. "I love you."

"I love you," she replied, her voice choked with emotion.

A side door opened and the doctor entered. He was in his fifties. Grey hair. Tall. Gave the impression of confidence and competence. He was wearing reading glasses and opening a file.

"Hello," he said quickly.

He placed the file on the desk and took a seat.

He began flipping through pages.

"So, I have the results right here," he said without looking up.

He seemed to be double- and triple-checking.

The water cooler gurgled in the corner of the office. Melissa jumped a little. I squeezed her hand.

A clock ticked loudly on the wall behind us.

The doctor finally lifted his head and looked at us over the top of his reading glasses.

"OK. This is the situation... it *is* cancer."

Her eyes were glossy. Her breath caught in her throat. She was no longer in the room.

I grabbed a notepad and pen off of the doctor's desk.

Dr. Chase explained the situation.

Melissa blinked, as if trying to focus on what he was saying. It didn't seem to be helping.

I wrote furiously. Words like "ductule," "lobule," "metastasize," and "mastectomy" filled the page.

I glanced over to see if "mastectomy" had gotten through to Melissa.

"My office will call with follow-up information on the surgery. But, with your family history, we aren't going to waste any time," Dr. Chase said, mostly to me, as he closed the file. "And we can expect a fairly aggressive plan as far as treatment goes."

He stood up and put his hand on Melissa's shoulder before leaving the room. She didn't notice.

We sat. My mind raced. Melissa trembled.

That fucking clock ticked.

After a couple minutes of this, I took her by the hand and helped her to her feet.

We walked slowly out of the office.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her. I'd never seen her look so... small.

She leaned against me in the elevator. She didn't say a word. Or blink.

We walked to the car. As I unlocked her door and opened it for her, she looked up at me. A tear started forming in her left eye. It rolled over the lashes and quickly down her cheek. Both eyes filled. Her lip quivered, just slightly.

I pulled her into the biggest, strongest hug that I could without fear of hurting her. The movement of her shoulders was the only real hint of her silent sobbing. She squeezed me back. Hard.

I'm not sure how long we stayed there. Though I am quite certain that we could have stayed there for months and I still would have never come up with the right things to say.

And I'm a writer.

I wanted to convey exactly to what degree I had her back. I wanted to let her know that I would be there for every single step along the way. I wanted to let her know that I loved her like nobody I had met before.

I wanted to do all that, but instead...

“Even though it is *my* turn, I suppose that I can let you pick the restaurant for lunch.”

She half-laughed. Well, a quarter, maybe.

“OK,” she said. “But can we order take-out at my place instead?”

“Of course,” I replied. “And we can have anything you want... except for Chinese. I had that for lunch yesterday.”

She did laugh that time. A whole laugh.

I brushed her hair out of her face.

The drive home was quiet and uneventful. Well, except for almost getting sideswiped by a city bus. And that wouldn't have been a huge deal except for the fact that this was my brother's car.

I don't own a car. Being an unsuccessful, and largely overlooked, writer does not pay as well as one might think. I could buy a car but I'd have to live in it. Granted, size-wise that would be a lateral move, at worst, from my current apartment.

Actually my brother wouldn't have cared if the bus had scraped every bit of paint off the side of his new car. He's great. And he's pretty mellow.

My mother likes to tell a story about how when he was a baby, due to some crossed parental wires, my brother spent the better part of a day in a crap-filled diaper. And didn't say a word. Conversely, she says, if I spent more than five seconds with a single drop of moisture in mine, I would scream as if I my Huggies had been full of snapping turtles.

But that is all hearsay.

Still, Leo makes Matthew McConaughey look super uptight. His wife, on the other hand...

People say that his wife and I don't get along. That's not exactly true. I mean, I did once call her a “dirty pirate hooker,” but I immediately felt bad. I felt bad for besmirching the good name of all those hard-working dirty pirate hookers out there who were just trying to put food on the table for their dirty pirate children.

I tolerated the woman at first. Mostly. But she made the mistake of talking smack about Melissa early on. Referring to her as “too goody-goody to be for real.” She mocked Melissa's charity work. When we first started dating, she'd call Melissa “Melanie” or even “Melody” on occasion.

This is why I only ever refer to my brother's wife as “my brother's wife.” Or something worse.

Enough about her. She is but a bit player in this story. Thankfully.

On to more pleasant things. The story of how Melissa and I first met is kind of cute.

It was nine months earlier. (Actually it was eight months, two weeks, and three days earlier.) I was on a disastrous date. I'm sorry -- the Hindenburg was a disaster. This was so much worse.

We were at a trendy restaurant, which featured a bar popular with folks meeting up before a night on the town. Sneeringly suited men with too much product in their hair, liquoring up women with too little fabric in their dresses. You know the type of place.

Three seconds after my date told me that "Dane Cook is a serious and talented artist," I excused myself from the table to go to the bar, ostensibly so that we wouldn't have to wait for our drinks. Though I was giving just as much consideration to running out the door and jumping into the river.

I strolled up to the bar and loosened my tie, searching my mental Rolodex of excuses for getting out of that situation:

"My dog's in heat."

"My aunt is sick."

"My dog is sick."

"My aunt's in heat."

Clearly I wasn't at my best.

I got the bartender's attention.

"Two white wines and a shot of tequila, please."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw her.

There was almost a glow around this woman. I am not sure if it was the way the lights in the place were hitting her, or if I was developing cataracts. I was completely transfixed.

She was like golden promise.

She noticed me noticing her and flashed me an adorable little smile. A smile that seemed to sneak up on her. I have no idea what my face looked like, but I am guessing that "suave" wouldn't describe it.

I'd love to tell you about the cut or style or designer of her outfit. I'd love to. But I'm a dude. The shirt was red (with some print), it gave a slight glimpse of cleavage, and it was the hottest thing I had ever seen.

"Holy crap."

I am still not sure if I said that or just thought it.

The bartender putting the drinks in front of me stopped my wondering. I downed the shot of tequila and gave him the “Dude, one more of those” finger. He poured it and I quickly shot it too. I requested one more and put my money on the bar. He filled it up.

“Good date?” a female voice asked from off to my side.

“Please let it be her,” I thought.

I turned slowly and saw her smiling.

“Score!” I thought. That time I made sure just to think it.

“It's been... an experience,” I offered.

“First date?”

“Blind date, even.”

“Ouch. Those can be rough,” she said with an expression of sweet commiseration that almost made me need to take a seat.

“I suspect that at some point doctors removed her spleen so that they could have extra room to jam even more evil into her.”

“This is Gina. I'm Melissa,” she said, extending her hand.

“Hi Gina... Melissa,” I responded, taking Melissa's hand. For a moment – only a moment – I considered kissing it. “What are you ladies up to this fine evening?”

“We're heading to a work party,” Melissa answered, looking at my date, as I tried to memorize her voice. “You want to come with?”

“More than you'll ever know,” I replied, probably too quickly. “Wait... you two don't work in a meth lab, do you? Screw it. Never mind. Let it be a surprise.”

I inched closer to Melissa.

“I hate to interrupt,” Gina, well, interrupted. “But what about her?”

We all looked at my date. She was fixing her hair or putting a hex on the maitre d' for seating us at a table that made her “bad side” visible to people walking by the restaurant.

“Oh yeah...” I had completely forgotten about her. “I'll handle it. One sec.”

I grabbed the two glasses of wine off the bar and started towards the table. Three steps into my trip, I stopped completely. I spun around and returned to the bar. Melissa and Gina watched me curiously. I

placed the wine glasses on the bar and quickly downed the third shot of tequila.

I grabbed the wine glasses and was off again.

I arrived at the table and placed them both in front of my date. I whispered in her ear. I gave her a salute... for some reason. And then I got out of there. Quickly.

“What did you say to her?” Melissa asked, as she and Gina got up from the bar.

“I told her that I left my herpes meds at home.”

“That would work on me,” Gina replied.

“I was kidding,” I assured them. “I have my Valtrex in my pocket.”

Melissa and Gina looked at each other for a moment before turning and heading towards the door.

“Kidding! I'm kidding,” I yelled after them. “I only know that name from TV commercials. Seriously! Hey, wait up!”

As soon as we arrived back at her apartment, Melissa pulled her cell phone out of her pocket and plopped down on the couch.

She spun the phone around in her hand.

“You can wait and call her later,” I offered.

“That'll only make her angrier.”

“Surely she'll be able to put that aside and realize this is about you.”

“Brandon... you've met my mother, right?”

She had a point.

Melissa took a deep breath and started dialing.

I gave her some space and went to the kitchen. I genuinely felt that her mother would sense that I was in the room, and it would only make her angrier.

Her mother blamed me for a number of things, including, but not limited to ruining her daughter's life, global warming, the Kennedy assassination, *Baby Mama*, and country music that sounds confusingly like rock music.

She'd probably risk having me killed, if Donna Karan made prison jumpsuits.

As I made a cup of green tea for Melissa, I thought back to when I met her mother. I didn't make the greatest of first impressions.

Melissa's mother, Catherine, lives in the suburbs.

Reluctantly.

She spent thirty years in the city. No one knows how her husband finally convinced her to move to a lovely house in the suburbs. My guess is that she was swayed by its close proximity to a portal to hell.

Maybe that's just me.

All of Catherine's closest friends still live in the city. And quite a soul-sucking collection of Chanel and self-importance this group is. None of them are as rich, beautiful, or powerful as they feel like they deserve to be.

You can guess how enjoyable this makes them to be around.

Catherine and her friends have a book club. You know, if you replace “book” with “wine” and “club” with “apooloza.”

Since Catherine would never, ever dare make her friends hire the sherpas and buy all the equipment they'd need to make their way to the suburbs, she hosts “book club” every sixth Wednesday in Melissa's apartment.

This is like clockwork.

Usually.

Ever since we started dating, I've used Melissa's apartment on Wednesday afternoons (other than book club days, as Catherine uses the afternoon for “prep time”) to grab a shower after playing pick-up basketball nearby.

Due to a botched “elbow job” (yeah, I don't know what that could possibly be either), “Cissy” had to drop out of the book club hosting rotation. Everyone moved up a week.

Catherine failed to inform Melissa. Thus beginning a catastrophic series of events!

Not really.

Catherine just saw my wiener.

There are two versions of the story: Her version. And the real version. And they collided that evening when Melissa met me at our favorite diner.

“WHAT DID YOU DO?!?!” she ask-yelled as she sat down opposite me in the booth.

“Hi sweetie.”

“What did you do?”

“They switched the book club schedule...”

“I know that, Brandon. What did *you* do?”

“Why don't we start with what you heard?”

Melissa gave me the stink eye. “I got a phone call, *at work*, from my mother. She was hysterical. She said... She said that she walked into my apartment and caught you, *naked*, with Q-tips in your ears, and you were singing “Yellow Polka Dot Bikini” and pleasuring yourself to *InStyle* magazine.”

“Melissa, that's just crazy. Come on. That is not at all what happened.

“Really?”

“Really. It was *People* magazine.”

“Brandon! This was your first time meeting her!”

“I thought I was alone!”

“That's your excuse?”

“Also, it wasn't *to* “Yellow Polka Dot Bikini”; that was merely serendipitous background music. The mood was irresistible, really.”

“Oh God... Brandon, she is never going to let me hear the end of this.”

“It's a very natural thing.”

“Why *People* magazine? Why?”

“You really want to know?” I asked.

“Oh no... not the one with Oprah on the cover?”

“That's the one,” I replied with a mouthful of fries.

“Oprah??? She's like a saint!”

“What? No. Sorry. There was a Mandy Moore story and...”

We sat silently for a few moments. She was beginning to calm down. Mostly.

“My mother saw... you.”

“You know, I think she was pretty impressed.”

She stared daggers again.

“Too soon?”

She stood up and walked towards the bathrooms.

“It's too soon. I see that now!” I yelled after her, stifling a laugh.

I carried the cup of tea in to Melissa. She managed a weak smile as I handed it to her. She made “Why did I call this woman?” eyes at me. The eyes I had seen so many other times while she was talking to her mother. This time they were definitely sadder.

I sat down on the couch and pointed to my lap. She spun around and put her feet up for a massage. She sipped her tea. Occasionally offered an “uh huh” or a “sure.”

I rubbed her feet, somehow managing to resist turning on the TV. The urge wasn't because I'm a guy and wanted to see last night's sports scores – especially since I had already seen them, you know, last night. I just needed to stop my brain from working for a little bit. I wanted to bombard it with outside stimuli to keep it from going where it wanted to go.

“I don't really want that, Mom,” Melissa said quietly.

A few moments later: “I *really* don't want that.” She was a little louder and more defiant.

But, finally, “Whatever you want. A family dinner. Sunday. Sure. I'll talk to you tomorrow, Mom.”

She tossed her phone on the couch and stared at the wall for a few moments.

“Hey,” I said.

She turned to me, the slightest hint of tears welling up in her eyes.

I nodded towards my lap. She removed her feet and slowly spun around. I put a pillow on my lap, just as she put her head down. I began playing with her hair.

“I steal one piece of her decorative soap every time we go to their house,” I admitted.

Melissa smiled. And then there was silence.

We stayed there. For hours. Me, playing with her hair and pretending to be strong. Her, cuddling against me and pretending not to be crying.

The charades allowed us to feel as if we were doing something. Anything.

As the sun set, the shadows creeping across her living room created a cozy atmosphere. It was as if we had our own little rent-controlled hiding place. The door was locked and we were keeping the world and its dangers at bay.

I think we both knew that this might be our last chance to delude ourselves with that thought for a while.

The temperature was dropping, so I stretched over and grabbed a blanket off the chair. I gently covered Melissa. She whispered “Thanks.” A few deep breaths later, I knew that she was having a hard time keeping it together.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” I whispered.

She sat up suddenly. She adjusted her shirt and fixed her hair.

“You know what? I think tonight would be a good night for you to go have a beer with your brother,” she said out of nowhere.

“Are you kidding?”

“You’ve been complaining that you guys don’t get to spend as much time together these days.”

“Sure,” I began. “But I don’t think that tonight is--”

“I-I just need some time to myself, I think. I can’t worry about you and--”

“But it’s--”

“Call your brother.”

“Are you sure?”

“Call him!” she said, passing me her phone. Then her voice softened a little. “Please.”

I understood where she was coming from and was happy to fulfill her request.

Okay, that is bullshit.

I had never felt so useless or rejected in my life. It crushed me.

But I knew that it wasn’t -- and couldn’t and shouldn’t be -- about me. At all. So, after telling her

eleven times to call my cell if she needed *anything*, I was meeting my brother an hour later in a nearby Irish pub. One that was chosen only for its proximity. Believe me.

“Surgery?” Leo asked.

“Surgery.”

“Treatment?”

“Definitely, yeah.”

“She's got a rough road ahead of her, kid.”

“I know.”

We nursed our beers for a while. We watched a couple of geriatric drunks try to charm a twenty-something waitress.

“Do you remember Grandma, Brandon? Or were you too young?”

“Barely. I remember the shortbread cookies. I remember her losing her hair.”

“It was hard on the family. Mom cried a lot. But Grandma leaned on us when she had to. Melissa is going to need her family now.”

“Have you met her mother?”

“Oh... Catherine.”

We each ordered another beer. We saw the exact moment when the waitress decided that the possibility of a generous tip was not enough to get her to put up with that much shit from those ancient luses.

“She's going to need you, Brandon.”

“I know.”

“I'm not sure that you do.”

“I do.”

“This is nothing like any relationship you've been in before. This is real grown-up stuff. You are going to have to step up here. Are you that type of guy?”

“Yes... Aren't you?”

“Sure. But I've always assumed that I was a little bit better than you,” he answered with a smile.

I was surprised when the laugh came out of me.

“I'm always here for you, little bro. Anything you need.”

“I know, man. And I appreciate it.”

We clinked our beer bottles together. We watched the waitress smile and blow kisses as the monster of a bouncer tossed the two old drunks out the door.

On Sunday, we again borrowed my brother's car for the drive out to the suburbs. Because we were in no rush to get there, the drive, of course, flew by.

Melissa's face showed some concerns about the whole family dinner thing. I tried to be supportive, yet stay neutral.

“We can back out, Melissa. No shame in backing out. You say the word and we'll back out. I think Shakespeare once said, “Thou haseth every right to backeth out.” Maybe it was the homeless guy by the bus station... Whichever. Backing out is a legit option here. Backing out. Yup... The old back out. Please, can we just back the hell out??”

She laughed. “You can read me so well.”

“I have a PhD in Melissaology.”

“A PhD? I am impressed.”

“Don't be -- I was banging my professor.”

She sighed. I knew.

The fallout from skipping the meal would be worse than actually spending the few hours with her mother.

Probably.

As I turned onto her parents' street, I heard Melissa take a deep breath. We shared a look of panic-filled facing of the inevitable as I pulled into the long driveway leading up to the McMansion.

I parked the car, got out, and went around to open Melissa's door. She wasn't waiting for that; she was just avoiding getting out for as long as humanly possible.

I'm guessing that prisoners on death row, taking their final walk, moved more quickly than we did.

And had fewer fears about their destination.

We got to the door. And didn't knock. For a while.

"Not too late to turn around and bolt," I offered.

"You think?"

"Absolutely."

"What excuse would we give?" she asked, mostly to humor me. "Car troubles?"

"Nobody *ever* questions explosive diarrhea," I said, just as Catherine opened the door.

And she heard it. Of course she did.

"Charming," Catherine growled.

"Hi, Mom."

They embraced. Catherine looked at me briefly before turning and ushering us in.

"You are looking well... considering."

"Mom, I feel fine."

"James is in the den," Catherine told me with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"James" is Jim to everybody else. And he is her husband. I'm not sure what he did to deserve such a position.

Perhaps he took a shot at the Pope.

As I made my way towards the den, I walked backwards and gave Melissa a little wave. She tried to give me a smile. But Catherine had already started.

"You must go see Mitsy's cancer guy. Best in the city and--"

I made the corner and headed east towards the den, wondering if I should have brought a canteen to ward off dehydration on my trip.

During the almost nine months that Melissa and I had been dating, I tried to come up with a description of the interior design and artwork in her parents' home. I originally opted for "Hell's Waiting Room." But I couldn't imagine Catherine waiting for anything.

Recently I've been going with "Sadistic Excess."

After I passed four bathrooms, six bedrooms, a “hat room,” and what looked like the bones of a previous guest who ventured off in search of the reading room and suffered a leg cramp, I arrived at the door to the den.

Jim was sitting in his favorite chair. To be fair, it was more throne than chair. And it was facing the largest television I had ever seen.

A television that only ever displayed sports. Which was fine with me. Today it was soccer.

I took a seat in the much smaller chair a few feet away from Jim.

Without looking at me, he opened the side of his chair -- which was a small fridge -- and pulled out a beer. He tossed it, more or less, in my direction. I caught it.

As I opened it, I glanced at the TV. “Spanish soccer?”

He nodded.

“Goooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooal!”

Things weren't going any better for Melissa on the patio with her mother.

“Melissa... I have no problem going into the city to take you to your appointments.”

“It's fine, Mom. I mean, I appreciate it. But Brandon has been great. Seriously. Very supportive.”

Her mother exhaled. Half exasperation. Half disgust. Half planning to cut my brake line.

“Yes. He has stuck around longer than your father and I predicted.”

“Daddy?”

“Fine. Longer than *I* expected.”

“I don't get what you have against Brandon, Mom. He's a good guy. Comes from a nice family--”

“Hippies.”

“His mother owning one pair of wooden clogs doesn't make them hippies. Or Dutch, for that matter.”

“Brandon is fine. I would let him clean my pool. I would let him tend to my flowers-- Well, not the good ones. But as someone for my daughter... For my *only* daughter? No.”

“Mother... can we change the subject, please?”

“To what?”

“Anything.”

“Fine.”

“Good.”

“Darling, is the chemo going to make you lose your hair? That is your best feature. Your face is going to look... boxy.”

Real Madrid scored one of the prettiest goals I had ever seen. Precision passing. A strange deflection. And, finally, a bicycle kick to score. Jim didn't say a word. Or blink.

When I mentioned that I was a big Liverpool fan, I think I noticed him roll his eyes slightly. Which, frankly, was one of the biggest conversations we've had since the first time we met. And that one involved only a grunt of acknowledgment. Or of indigestion.

Still, I thought as I relaxed in the comfy chair, it could have been worse. He could have been a cricket fan.

Dinner with Catherine was always an event.

The food was nothing short of amazing. She always served the perfect wine. Wonderful classical background music played. A whole mess of silverware I had no idea how or when to use was lined up mostly according to height.

And there was always a target for her simmering rage.

That night, as was often the case, the target was me.

“Brandon, how are you doing with your... writing?”

“It's going well, thanks. I'm writing for a number of websites now.”

“Web... sites?”

“Y... es.”

“And how much do they pay?”

“Mother!” Melissa yelled with her mouth full.

“What? I'm just curious.”

“I do OK. Thanks for your concern,” I fake-smiled.

“I know how hard it can be for writers to earn a living. Even the good ones have trouble,” she smirked.

“It can be stressful. But my family has always been supportive. And now, of course, I have Melissa. She's been amazing.”

“When I was in the city last week, I saw this fellow selling purses.” Catherine took a sip of wine. “And they weren't even real! Industrious little foreigner. Good for him. Maybe if your stories don't start selling, you can get a job selling purses.”

“Mother, Brandon is not going to sell knock-off Louis Vuitton bags.”

“Fine, fine. I was just trying to help.”

We all ate silently for a few moments.

“What about telemarketing?” Catherine asked.

This went on for an indeterminate amount of time. I guessed six weeks. Melissa said it was more like an hour and a half. But she had a lot of wine.

As we were starting dessert, Catherine dropped her fork.

“Oh! Melissa, I saw Steve in the city the other day. He's back from Africa.”

“Is that right?” Melissa asked.

Steve is Melissa's ex. He's a doctor. He was an Olympic rower. And even though he and Melissa only dated for a few months, Catherine has remained obsessed with him. She looked like a teenaged girl discussing Justin Timberlake. Or, you know, like a grown woman... discussing Justin Timberlake.

“Yes! Melissa, he looked more gorgeous than usual. I think he's gotten even taller.”

“Ah, yes. One of those classic growth spurts you have when you are twenty-nine,” I mumbled before I could stop myself.

Catherine's eyes lit up. She knew that she had gotten under my skin.

So she continued, as I bit my lip, as Melissa glared at her, as Jim... ate his meal.

Catherine regaled us with stories of Steve helping orphans in Africa. Actually, I suppose, that was pretty cool of him. Prick. She told us about his time in the Olympics. About how he once dated one, or both, of the Olsen Twins. She told us about the time he saved a man from getting hit by the subway. I am pretty sure that she was ready to tell us that his urine can cure scurvy, when I found myself

interrupting again.

“Steve... wasn't he the one who got arrested for selling weed in high school?” I pretended to wonder.

Catherine was nearly apoplectic.

“His family had briefly cut him off to teach him a lesson about money!” she sputtered.

“Perhaps he should have tried selling knock-off purses?”

Catherine's face turned bright red.

“No one is impressed with your smug superiority,” she hissed.

“Well, I've tried other kinds of superiority, but smug just fit, you know?”

I noticed Melissa looking at me. She didn't look angry, just tired.

Very, very tired.

Catherine was still trying to engage me. She took shots at my writing, my bank account and, if I heard her correctly, my manhood.

“I think we should be leaving,” I said, never taking my eyes off of Melissa.

“But we are still having dessert,” Catherine countered, as if that would immediately close the issue.

“I have to meet my brother in the city. Sorry. I just remembered.”

“Melissa, would you like to stay here overnight?” Catherine urged in the form of an almost-question.

“No thanks, Mom. I have some paperwork that I have to get caught up on. Thanks for dinner, though.”

Melissa kissed her Dad on the cheek. I shook his hand.

Catherine escorted us to the door. She put her arm around Melissa.

“If you need anything, sweetie -- anything at all -- you call. I'll get you the number for Mitsy's doctor.”

“Thanks, Mom.”

They embraced.

“Lovely as always,” I offered.

She closed the door in my face.

“Sadly, that actually could have gone worse,” I said to Melissa.

“And you weren't helping matters.”

“I know. I'm sorry. I wasn't at my best tonight.”

“It's OK. Just get me home, Brandon.”

“You got it. Oh,” I said, reaching into my pocket. “I picked something up for you in the gift shop.”

I passed her a green seashell decorative soap.

After a few days, we started settling back into a routine.

Well, mostly.

I was still overprotective.

She was still oversensitive. (Her word!)

And this all bubbled over one day as we drove to Ikea in my brother's car.

We were at a red light, listening to music.

“I'm going to die!” Melissa blurted out.

“We're all going to die,” I countered. “Especially this dude, if he doesn't soon realize that the light turned green.”

“I am serious, Brandon.”

“I see that.”

“I don't want you to have to see me go through all of this.”

“I can handle it, Mel.”

“Surgery... treatment...”

“I know.”

“I am going to lose my hair...”

“I get all that.”

“I'm not going to be pleasant to be around.”

“Thankfully I am charming enough for both of us.”

“I am not kidding, Brandon. It's just... You should leave me.”

I pulled over to the side of the street and stopped the car.

“If you died, I would be absolutely destroyed. Honestly. Devastated, really. I am not sure that I'd know what to do with myself. Or if I'd ever recover. But, if you think that I'd give up the chance to spend as much time as humanly possible with you beforehand... you are completely out of your fucking mind.”

There was silence for a few moments.

“I guess that's that,” she said.

“It is.”

I pulled back into traffic.

She sat quietly for another moment. “I don't like this song.”

Our first date took place three days after we met that night in the bar. I had pushed for sooner.

Melissa was putting in crazy hours at work, and I had to use my charms to get an hour of her time that evening. Charms and guilt. Charms, guilt, and promises of the best fish tacos in the city.

I arrived at her office, which was absolutely hopping for eight o'clock at night. They were in the middle of some campaign for a new bar. Did I mention that Melissa is a publicist?

When she spied me walking across the open-concept office, her first reaction was, “Oh, God!”

And not the good kind, that I'd gotten from so many women in the past and -- Damn. I almost got that out with a straight face.

She looked at her watch quickly.

“It's eight already?”

“Yup,” I replied.

Despite the fact that people were busy, every set of eyes gave me the once-over. Some opened wider, I assumed because they recognized me from the office party. Others narrowed, I assumed because they

had actually talked to me at the office party.

I waved to Gina; she waved back as she talked on the phone at her desk.

“I need one minute,” Melissa yelled over her shoulder as she scooted towards an office in the corner.

“OK,” I replied to no one in particular as I wandered over to a nearby wall with a large number of plaques covering it.

I was pleasantly surprised to see that almost all of them had Melissa's name on them. And they weren't work-related PR awards. They were all for charity.

“Food Drive,” “Children's Hospital Gala,” “Get Your Wish Foundation,” and “Cancer Relay for Life” are a few that I managed to read before she returned.

“I'm so sorry! I completely lost track of time,” she explained, looking a bit embarrassed when she realized what I was checking out.

I made an impressed face and did a thumb jerk towards the wall of fame. She made a shy face and waved me off dismissively.

“Are you ready?” she asked with a smile that nearly made me forget my name.

“Absolutely.”

We took two steps before she was bear-hugged by a young woman pushing a sandwich cart. The young woman ran on the spot, squealing, and held out her hand to Melissa. Melissa grabbed her hand, looked at a ring, squealed, and began running on the spot with the woman.

It was much cuter than it sounds.

When Melissa finished getting the details, we started towards the door. Every single person in the place smiled -- a genuine smile -- at her as we walked by. Most of them offered some variation of “Have a good dinner.” She replied to every one of them by name.

As the elevator door opened and we prepared to get on, we met the water delivery dude. He was in his mid-fifties, a little roundish, and seemed to be having a bad night. At least until he saw us.

“Melissa!” he yelled.

“Hi, Jack! How's your son?”

“All-state first baseman!”

“That's excellent. Take care.”

The man walked away with a big grin.

As we rode the elevator down, she told me a story about her day. I tried to listen. I truly did. But I was completely fixated on her taking her hair out of a ponytail and running her hand through it.

I was still staring like mad as the elevator doors opened to let us out.

We walked, talking and laughing, to the front door.

“Hola Manuel,” she almost sang to the night watchman.

“¿Como estás, Melissa?”

“¡Muy bien, gracias! Que tenga una buena noche.”

I held the door for her as we ventured out into the warm night air.

“Your first day working here?” I asked with a smirk.

She punched my shoulder.

As we walked, I continued to be impressed by the fact that every single person in that place was in love with her.

Impressed but not surprised.

The restaurant was a dive. Of that, there could be no question.

“I... have never been here before,” I offered meekly.

“Mmhhh. Nice impression for a first date, buddy.”

“I know, I know.”

Then she broke into a wide smile. She put her hand on mine. It was as if every nerve ending in my body had traveled to my hand... and taken Ecstasy. I never wanted her to remove her hand from mine. Ever.

“It's fine, Brandon. I am having a lovely time.”

And then the food came.

She dug into her fish taco with both hands immediately. She took a large bite and ended up with some glop on her chin. I could not have been more charmed.

I pointed to her chin, and she laughed as she dabbed at it with her napkin.

"I'm sorry! I skipped lunch."

"It's okay. Your fries look good too."

"You should have ordered some," she said, grabbing one and tossing it into her mouth.

"I'm good with my taco, thanks. I've eaten in the last month."

She gave me a faux angry glare. But she couldn't hold it very long.

"So, Mr. Brandon, how is it that such a decently nice and moderately attractive man like yourself is single in a city with such a dearth of men?"

"I've been accused of being too picky. Maybe I was just waiting to find a woman who would attack a fish taco like a wolverine?"

With a mouthful of food, she mouthed "Me?" and pointed to herself. And tried another angry glare.

"And, darling Melissa," I continued. "How is it that you are still single?"

"Well... I think I just attract the wrong kind of guys."

"She-males?"

"No. Mostly guys who are just interested in my money. Well, not *my* money -- my parents have money," she said, her voice a little quieter.

"Well, that sucks. I don't care at all about money. Plus, I am mainly just interested in your body."

"What do you mean you don't care about money?" she asked.

"Um. You know money? I don't care about it."

"How is that even possible in this city?" She looked genuinely baffled.

"I've had jobs where I've made decent money. I've had jobs where I've made no money. And, really, neither type made me any happier than the other. As long as I have a roof over my head and food in my belly, I am good."

"My mother is going to hate you," she said.

"I don't know. Mothers typically love me."

We ate loudly for a few moments.

"So, money really means nothing to you?"

“Are you going to buy me a pony with it?”

“Um... no,” she replied.

“Then what do I care?” I replied, as I grabbed one of her French fries.

“Did you just steal one of my fries?”

“You're rich. You can spare it.

Dr. Chase wasn't messing around. He scheduled the surgery for two weeks after our office visit.

As each day went by, Melissa's anxiety levels understandably rose.

One morning, at 3:47 a.m., I was awakened by loud sighing.

I had mostly opened my blurry eyes when I saw a form standing in front of the floor-length mirror.

A couple of blinks revealed it to be a female form.

Squinting revealed it to be a naked female form.

Then I heard a sob.

“Mel... What's wrong?”

“It's just... I have gorgeous breasts. Don't I have gorgeous breasts?”

“The gorgeousest.”

“Not for long,” she sobbed again.

I sat up in bed. “Awww, sweetie...”

“I'll never look like this again.”

“If it's any consolation, I was thinking about maybe knocking you up at some point and ruining them both anyway.”

I reached out for her hand but she moved it away.

“Brandon... they are going to lop off one of my breasts.”

“I know...”

“I’ll only have one.”

“That would allow me to feel you up with one hand and still have one free to hold my beer.”

“You are terrible!”

“Fine. Sorry. One hand free for my universal remote?”

She let out a long breath. She had stopped sobbing.

“Still, this is the sexiest I’ll ever look naked. It’s all downhill after this.”

I grabbed her by the hips. “Pictures! For posterity!” I pulled her back onto the bed with me. She buried her nose into my neck.

“I love you,” she whispered.

“You should,” I replied.

We cuddled together in the dark.

I kissed her on the forehead.

“Besides, your ass is still perfection.”

The morning of the surgery, I woke up early. There was no possible way that I was going to be able to fall back to sleep. Scary thoughts in my head were only being replaced by even scarier ones.

I knew that Melissa needed as much sleep as she could get -- as she hadn't been getting a lot -- so I slipped out of bed, threw on some workout clothes, and went for a run.

It started out well. The iPod was doing a great job of randomizing for me. Lots of upbeat stuff. The weather was perfect. Sunny but not too hot, because of the early hour.

I ran by people walking dogs. I ran by delivery men, making sure that our delicate lives would not be interrupted due to a lack of any of the items that we take for granted. I ran by parents shuffling their kids off to school or daycare. I ran by elderly couples plodding along together, every step in tune after decades of practice. I ran by a good cross section of the early morning city's denizens.

And I realized that I hated them all.

I stopped running.

I resented them all for not having to go through what Melissa was about to go through. (Even though I

am sure that most of them had some experience in the area.)

I had an urge to punch a jerkface in an overpriced suit who was berating his dog for not using the bathroom.

I wanted to go home. I wanted to crawl back into bed with Melissa.

So I did.

The automatic door opened with a *fwuuush*. I hesitated. I wanted to enjoy a few more moments of sunshine. Of fresh air. Of... avoiding the inevitable.

Melissa, on the other hand, had a different plan. She bolted through the door. Catherine followed right after her. Jim was still parking the car.

I took a deep breath of fresh air. It would have to last me for a while.

I walked through the door.

While my eyes were still adjusting to the relative darkness of the lobby, I heard the unmistakable "Ahem." Catherine was holding the elevator door open. I hustled over, as I assumed every fiber of her being was telling her to let it close.

Making good use of our ideal height difference, I leaned against Melissa and kissed her on top of the head.

Catherine was pounding the "Close Door" button mercilessly. "You know, we could have brought a larger support group with us."

"I know, Mom. But I wanted to keep it to just family."

Catherine turned and gave me an icy glare.

She turned back to face the door, as if she was going to make the elevator speed up with her mind. "Fine..."

I gave Melissa another kiss on the top of her head.

Jim fiddled with his Blackberry. Catherine complained about the bed sheets being too coarse and wondered very aloud why I hadn't thought to bring any from Melissa's apartment. I unpacked some of Melissa's belongings. You know, the items I was bright enough to bring.

Melissa stared off into space.

I took a seat next to her on the bed.

“I don't like the word 'cancer' at all,” she blurted.

“I don't think anyone does,” I replied.

“No, I mean, I think this would be easier if it was called something else.”

I thought for a moment.

“What about 'Consuela?’”

“CON-sue-la. Con-SUE-la. Con-sue-LA,” she said. “I like it.”

“Consuela,” I said.

“Consuela is someone evil, but you can still kick her ass,” she smiled. “Consuela sucks.”

“Consuela sucks, Mel.”

She leaned on me.

“That is idiotic,” Catherine hissed. “You two have to grow up. This is a very serious situation.”

“I know, Mom. Believe me, I know.”

“We could have named it Catherine,” I whispered.

“That would be *too* scary,” she whisper-giggled.

Catherine paced back and forth. She complained about pretty much everything she saw.

“Jim, is this not the dirtiest hospital room you have ever seen in your life?” He lifted his head and looked like he might have something to say, but she was sick of waiting. “Filthy! I wonder if I know anyone on the Board at this place.”

For the first time, I saw her as a scared little woman. Worried about her daughter. Hating the feeling of not being able to control the outcome. For the first time, I felt like we had found some common ground. A common enemy. Maybe we could build on this.

“Is that what 'writers' are wearing these days?” Catherine stared me up and down. “You look like a bum. And not one of the bums still clinging to the tiniest bit of pride.”

As I debated replying, and pondered gradations of hobo fashion, Dr. Chase walked in.

“Melissa, they are going to come in to get you in about five minutes. Any last minute questions or

concerns?”

“No. I think I am ready. Well, not ready, but...”

“Everything is going to be fine. Before you know it, you'll be back in here recovering.”

“In this mess,” Catherine stage-whispered.

Dr. Chase ignored. “We're going to take good care of you. See you soon.”

Melissa's eyes got bigger. I could see the negative thoughts running through her head. She dried her palms on the bed sheets. She looked like she wanted to bolt but was wondering if her legs would actually work.

“Oh, I brought you a present,” I pretended to suddenly remember.

“A present?”

I reached into my back pocket and took out a sticker.

“What is it?”

I leaned in and started gently tugging down the front of her gown.

“What are you doing?!” Melissa and Catherine asked at the same time.

“Trust me...” I replied to Melissa only.

She stopped pulling away and watched me with a bemused expression.

I removed the sticker from the backing and gently placed it on the upper half of her left breast. She looked at it and started laughing.

“What is that? What does it say?!” Catherine demanded.

“Cut off THIS boob,” Melissa replied.

Catherine glared at me.

“I just wanted to make sure. Things happen...”

Catherine was completely enraged. She was about to explode but was interrupted by the arrival of two nurses pushing a stretcher.

“It's time,” said the nurse who looked remarkably like Bea Arthur.

Melissa looked at them for a few moments before climbing on the stretcher.

Catherine pushed me out of the way to get in next to Melissa.

“I’m here. I’ll make sure that everything is fine. *Someone* has to...”

“Thanks, Mom.”

Jim walked over and gave her a kiss on the forehead. He smiled. She smiled back.

As I stepped up to take my turn, all the things I had planned to say had completely left my mind.

I had rehearsed this moment while running, in the shower, pretty much every day for the past two weeks.

I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

I leaned in closer to her, hoping that her presence would make things better, as it had so many times before.

Still nothing.

She stared at me. Her eyes began to fill.

My mouth opened and I squeaked out, “Consuela sucks.”

She laughed out loud. Tears filled her eyes completely now. “Consuela sucks.”

“I love you,” I whispered.

And then I kissed her. Hard. Wishing with everything I had that I would never have to stop.

Bea Arthur cleared her throat.

I reluctantly pulled back. I moved Melissa’s hair out of her eyes. I slowly, painfully, let go of her hand.

Melissa looked at the three of us. She gave a little wave.

And then she put on her game face.

“Let’s go.” Her voice came out stronger than she probably planned.

They wheeled her out.

The room was quiet. Strangely quiet for a hospital, it seemed.

I had to get out of there.

I was turning left as I hit the hallway when I felt an arm grab my sleeve.

I turned around and Catherine was staring at me.

“You are not remotely good enough for my daughter. You never have been. And you never will be. However, for reasons beyond me, she seems to want to have you in her life at this point in time. And this is an important point in time. She is going to need support. And not your so-called jokes. Real, grown-up support. And I'll be here to make sure she gets it. Don't get in my way.”

With that, she turned and marched off.

I turned back around and headed in the other direction, her words falling off me with each step I took. Frankly, she said worse things to me pretty much every time our paths crossed.

They were completely forgotten by the time I reached the bathroom.

I walked past the polished porcelain. I ignored the large mirrors. I entered the first stall.

And I puked my guts out.

I assumed that the surgery itself would be one of the low points.

I assumed that afterwards we would have time to get our bearings before the chemo started.

Boy, was I way off.

The surgery was “successful.” Everything “looked good.” Lymph nodes were removed and sent to the lab. And we were still waiting for results.

I'm not a good wait-er. In general.

But now, with something so important on the line...

Every ring of the phone took a year off my life.

I died twelve years ago.

You are probably wondering why I am talking so much about myself. I should be telling you about Melissa. And I will.

It's a little difficult.

Melissa did not handle it well. At all.

She was fine with the actual surgery. The pain didn't bother her. Nor did the changing of the bandages. She was a trooper.

But she came back from surgery a different person.

Now don't for a minute think that I don't understand how big a deal the surgery was. And don't think that I am not sensitive to what losing a breast can do to the self-image of a woman. Especially for such a young woman.

I got all that. I did. I still do.

It just absolutely crushed me to see her like that.

I was even relieved when Catherine would drop in. I thought maybe another woman could say or do or feel the right thing. But Catherine either couldn't, or wouldn't, get through to her. And her visits were becoming less frequent.

One rainy morning, I came up with what I thought was quite possibly the most brilliant plan ever conceived.

Melissa was sipping her juice and flipping through her copy of *The New Yorker*. She wasn't reading.

I watched for a few moments, ever so pleased with the genius of my plan. Then I could keep it in no longer.

"I think you should go in to the office today."

"What?" She didn't really look up.

Her boss loves her and had given her a "paid leave" until she was finished with treatment. Technically, Melissa had about ninety vacation and sick days gathered up. The girl loves her job.

"I think it would do you good. See some friendly faces. I mean, I'm delightful, sure, but hanging out with others might be fun."

"I don't know, Brandon."

"You can see what projects they are working on. You can get your mind off of things a little. And they could probably use your input. You know that you run that place."

"That's not true."

"Come on, rockstar. Let's get you all tarted up and out on the streets."

She was considering it. "Well, I feel like I haven't worn heels in months."

"I feel like I haven't either!"

“And I do have this dress...”

“That's my girl!”

And she smiled. Not an “everything is fine” smile. Not an “I don't want people to worry about me” smile.

A real smile.

It was the most gorgeous thing I had ever seen.

She got cleaned up and dressed. She looked lovely.

“Are you sure?”

“Quite,” I replied.

“Do I look pasty?”

“Nope.”

“Would you tell me if I did?”

“Probably not.”

“Brandon...”

“You look beautiful. I called you a cab. Now get your cute little behind downstairs.”

She kissed me. “Thank you.”

“Have fun, sweetie.”

The moment the door closed behind her, I rushed over to the window.

The cab was waiting. And I stood there and watched until she got in and it drove off.

And then I started cleaning. Melissa hadn't been up to her usual cleaning routine lately.

Now, I'm no expert cleaner. I see myself as a slob that tries hard not to be one. I really had no idea what I was going to do.

But today, on this day, I felt I could do no wrong.

I was sitting at the kitchen/office table. I had my laptop and was doing a little writing. Well, trying to do a little writing. I was distracted. I couldn't stop imagining Melissa's co-workers showering her with love. I could see her smiling. Test results and chemo were the last things on her mind. She was in her element. She was happy. She was Melissa again.

When I heard a key in the lock, I bounded to the door like a puppy that had been left alone for days.

As the door swung open, I prepared myself for a smiling and excited girlfriend.

That isn't what I saw standing there.

Her bottom lip was quivering. Her waterproof mascara had been pushed far past its breaking point. She dropped her bag on the floor. She put her arms up for a hug.

Being careful with incisions, and that general area, I pulled her in close.

“What happened, sweetie?”

In between huge sobs, I made out, “They don't need me anymore.”

I led her to the couch. She sat down. I took off her shoes and put her feet on my lap.

Tears rolled down her cheeks with impunity.

“Tell me...”

She took some deep breaths. She tried to will herself to stop crying. She was about half successful.

“Everyone told me how great I look.”

“That's a good thing though, right?”

“It's *how* they said it, Brandon.”

More deep breaths and sobs escaped her.

“They don't neeeeeed me.”

“I don't believe that.”

“It's true, Brandon. All my projects are going smoothly. Without me!”

“That just means that you did a good job training your team. That's what you want, right?”

“There's a new girl.”

“OK.”

“She's very pretty,” she said, more as an accusation than a compliment.

“I don't understand--”

“I liked being the office hottie,” she sobbed.

“Oh, my love, I can't imagine any office in the world where you wouldn't be the hottie.”

“Thank you, Brandon.”

“That didn't help at all, did it?” I asked.

“No.”

“I bet that she's a bit of a trollop.”

“She's not. I asked.” She put her head on my shoulder. “You cleaned my apartment wrong.”

I thought that finding out that her lymph nodes were clean would make Melissa happier.

And it did. To an extent.

I guess that it is hard to get too excited about plugging one hole in your sinking boat when water is pouring in through dozens of others.

Catherine was coming around more often. She pushed the issue of breast reconstruction. I'm still not sure if she was trying to help or if she just didn't want her trophy daughter to look lopsided.

I am sure that Melissa wondered that as well. Though we never discussed it.

Melissa still wasn't doing well.

She stood topless in front of the bathroom mirror a lot. I wouldn't have known, but she forgot to lock the door one afternoon and I barged in.

“Are you OK, Mel?”

She looked like she had been caught. “Fine. Fine. Just seeing how it was healing.”

She spent a lot of time thinking about chemo. She admitted that to me one night.

“They are going to put poison in my body.”

“They have to make sure that Consuela is gone.”

“What if it changes me?”

“How so?” I asked.

“I don't know...”

I couldn't get her to finish the thought.

She was trying, though. She was trying to do what she thought someone in her situation should be doing.

She attended a survivors group meeting at Catherine's strong urging. Just one meeting.

She arrived home with tales of women suffering and sick kids.

And she cried for two days.

Early one morning, as I ran -- and worried -- as hard as I could, my mind wandered back through the previous few weeks.

The diagnosis flowed into the surgery. The surgery flowed into the aftereffects.

It was becoming harder and harder to engage Melissa. She spoke less. She smiled less. She laughed almost never.

I thought about everything I read online. What to expect after surgery. Before chemo. During chemo. I read everything.

It didn't help me at all.

No matter how many firsthand accounts you read, it is completely different when it is someone you love going through it. The lows seem to go lower and to last longer than they warned you about.

I knew that I had to do something.

And that morning, as I ran by the fountain, sending pigeons flying in all directions, I knew exactly what that was.

Planning the perfect evening is no easy feat.

Planning the perfect evening is even more difficult when you are de facto roommates. I hadn't been inside my own apartment for the better part of a month.

But Melissa deserved a great night, and I was determined to give it to her.

She was going out to her parents' place the next day for a visit. Catherine convinced her that she needed a day by the pool. Melissa had no real interest in that but thought that it would be easier to just give in.

Of course, she was right.

So I had two days. Forty-eight hours to plan the ultimate in cheer-up evenings. My mind bubbled with possibilities.

I knew that I would need transportation. While Melissa checked her e-mail, I grabbed my phone and slipped into the bathroom.

My brother had always appreciated my favor-asking finesse. “Dude, need your car. Coming over tomorrow morning! Bye!”

I slunk back out and Melissa was still on her laptop.

I sat on the couch next to her. She looked at me. I smiled. Big.

“Well, you're in a good mood.”

“I have a pretty girlfriend.”

She rolled her eyes, with love, and went back to her e-mail.

While she spent a good chunk of the afternoon napping, I was on my laptop. I was researching, plotting, e-mailing, and smiling.

I didn't have a lot of time, but I was becoming increasingly confident that I could come up with something great.

The hardest part was going to be keeping the silly grin off of my face for the rest of the day. I caught a glimpse of myself in the living room mirror. I wasn't off to a good start.

As Melissa was moping her way through the evening, unable to find anything to do to keep herself occupied, I knew that my plan was a good idea.

I just needed to make sure that everything was perfect.

Within seconds of Melissa driving away with her dad, I was running towards the subway.

As I rode it, I was trying to will it to speed up. Sadly, it was a super power that I didn't have. Yet.

I couldn't get to my brother's fast enough.

When I finally got there, I rang his buzzer repeatedly until his wife's voice squawked from the speaker.

“What *is* it?”

“It's me! It's me!”

She groaned. But, eventually, she buzzed me in.

I took the stairs up the four flights, as I was sure that their elevator would feel even more excruciatingly slow than usual.

Before my knock could connect with the door, it swung in and the She-Beast was holding out a set of keys.

“And don't you scratch it.”

I ignored her and looked over her shoulder.

“Leo!”

He was wandering around with a toothbrush in his mouth. “Exactly what do you have planned?”

“I'll tell you later!”

I snatched the keys from its talon and raced down the hallway.

I drove the streets like I was mad at them. I made calls and sent e-mails from stop lights.

I visited various stores and shops to make sure that I had everything I needed.

At one point, while lugging a couple of bags of food down the sidewalk to the parked car, I made a quick call to Melissa.

“Hi, sweetie. How is pool time with your mother?”

“She's tried to talk me into signing up for a country club, and she's berated two gardeners and the postman.”

“So, pretty standard?”

“Yup. How are you?”

“I'm OK. Running around a bit.”

“Get any writing done?”

“A little, yeah.”

“Oh... she's coming back. What is she wearing now? God... this has been a long day. I'll be home around eight.”

“Try to have fun, Mel.”

“Yeah... see ya.”

It took me three trips up the stairs to get everything from the car to Melissa's apartment. Then I set a land speed record getting the car to Leo's apartment. And suffered through the world's longest subway trip back.

But, finally, I was in the apartment. The ingredients for a perfect evening were all around. It was time to get to work.

I was busy futzing with the flowers on the table when I heard her voice behind me.

“What... What is all this?”

I hadn't heard her come in. But everything was set. Thankfully.

“Melissa!”

I turned and gave her a hug. Her look of complete confusion remained.

“Brandon... is this our nine-month anniversary?”

“Nope. This is... our night.”

“Our night?”

“Yes. Well, *your* night. Do you want to get changed?”

“Do you think that I need to get changed?”

“Oh, no. Not at all. I, um--”

“I am just going to go wash my mother off of my face. Be right back. Wait... Are those Opus Calla Lilies?”

“Yes!” I replied, my voice coming out considerably louder than I planned.

“Those are my favorite.”

“I know. Go. Go wash your face!”

I practically shoved her into the bathroom.

I adjusted the flowers again. I lit one more candle. I fixed my shirt. I smiled as if I was high.

Very, very high.

She exited the bathroom and ran into the bedroom. “Be back in one minute.”

I paced.

And paced.

When she returned from the bedroom, she really took a good look around.

“Wow. Everything looks gorgeous. Something smells delicious. And you look so handsome. Did you iron your shirt?”

“Yes!” Loud again.

“I don't understand.”

“It's your night. A night to celebrate you. And-- Hey, you changed.”

She spun around once and showed off a lovely blue dress with a lacy cover-up dealie.

“A little less revealing than usual...” she trailed off.

“Stunning. Really.”

She proudly showed me her shoes. Shoes that made her leggy legs look even, well, leggier.

Just remembering it, I still can't formulate thoughts.

“They are Christian Louboutins.” She smiled.

“You think he is going to want them back?” (They can't all be gold.)

“Funny. Did you notice? Four-inch heel.”

“Very nice.”

I took her hand and made her spin around again.

I totally forgot where we were and what I was supposed to be doing. “Oh! OK... Please sit down, my love.”

She did a little curtsy and took a seat that I held out for her.

“This is a lot of build up, Brandon, if you are getting ready to break out your favorite delivered pizza or your special Pop-tarts and ice cream.”

“Not this time, sweetie. This time I raised the bar a little.”

“Oh, do tell...”

“I’ll do better than that.”

I kissed her gently on the lips -- which, as always, made my face feel flushed -- and strutted a little to the kitchen.

I glanced back over my shoulder and saw her take in the surroundings. She leaned in to smell the lilies.

I purchased four dozen. There were two dozen on the table. Another dozen in a vase on the mantel and a dozen on the coffee table.

They made me sneeze.

I bought a whole mess of candles and candle holders. They were placed strategically around the apartment. I wanted it to be romantic and yet have them cast just enough light so that neither of us would accidentally eat a wine cork.

The candles were also lightly scented, which had the added benefit of disguising the aromas of a few of my kitchen learning experiences that occurred during the afternoon.

I had some mellow background music playing. I spent two hours (at least) picking the most romantic song released each year since Melissa was born.

When I returned from the kitchen, carrying our plates, she looked very curious. And possibly a little nervous.

“Intrigued?” I smiled.

“Very!”

“Well, mademoiselle, what we have here is a starter salad with warm goat cheese crostini.”

She looked at me. If she was trying to hide her doubt, she wasn't doing a wonderful job of it.

I set the food down in front of her and then took my seat.

She looked at the plate. She looked up at me. She looked at the plate again.

“It *is* a starter salad with warm goat cheese crostini!”

“I know.”

Her eyes lit up.

I could not have been more pleased with myself at that moment. And, frankly, I am typically pretty pleased with myself.

“Try it!”

And she did. She was a little cautious initially, but she made the pleased “hmmmmm” face at the first bite.

With a mouthful, “This is very good.”

“Thanks. And it's just the beginning.”

She started to regale me with tales of her mother from the day. But, a few bites in, she lost interest in rehashing such things.

“How did you learn how to make this, Brandon?”

“A man's got to have some secrets.”

“I am very impressed.”

“Well, good.”

Judging by the speed with which she cleaned her plate, I would definitely say that the starter was a success.

I picked at my own food. Too excited to really eat.

She swallowed a mouthful of water. “What's next?”

I scooped up our plates and disappeared to the kitchen again. I had everything laid out.

I opened the warming trays -- the food hadn't been there long! -- and plated the entrees carefully. Then I stared at the plates, trying to decide which was the better-looking one, to give to Melissa.

I reappeared with a bit of a flourish.

“Ooooh. What have we here, Brandon?”

“For our entree, I decided to go with a specialty of mine--”

She snorted.

I tried not to laugh, "-- Steak au poivre and buttered asparagus with hollandaise sauce."

"Get out."

"I will not."

She was stretching her neck to see the plates.

I placed one in front of her. Her eyes bulged.

"That looks -- and smells -- amazing!"

"Twas nothing."

I took my seat. She was already two forkfuls in.

"So good!"

"Thanks, lady. Wine?"

"Certainly!"

I ran back to the kitchen and returned with a bottle in hand.

"Could I interest you in a 2003 Chateauneuf du Pape?"

"But of course."

"I think you'll notice that it is a full body red with the faintest aromas of vanilla, red fruit, and cinnamon."

"Is that so?"

I thought back to what I had read online. "Yes!"

I poured us each a glass and then returned to my seat.

Again, I toyed with my food. It was too much fun to watch her.

She had smiled more in the time that we had been eating than she had in the previous week and a half. I resisted the urge to kiss her every fourteen seconds.

Barely.

"I can't believe you cooked all of this," she said, again with her mouth full.

“It was nothing. A little messy but I handled it. Just don't go in the kitchen.”

“OK,” she smiled.

“No... seriously.”

We ate. We laughed. We talked.

We talked about things other than Consuela.

I told her how amazing she looked in that dress.

She mocked me because I had a little product in my hair.

It was perfect.

And then there was a knock at the door.

Melissa looked a little concerned. Of course, she wasn't concerned enough to leave the last few bites of steak on her plate.

“I wonder who that could be at the door...” I said. Very subtle.

She was wiping her face with her napkin and looking a little curious as I strolled to the door.

I opened the door, and it was Canadian singer-songwriter Oliver Pigott.

We discovered Oliver on our third date. As we wandered along after dinner, we heard great live music coming out of a smallish pub.

“Just for a few minutes?” Melissa asked, with a foot already inside the door.

We ended up staying for four hours.

Oliver played almost the whole night. Song after song of both his own creations and any requests that the small but boisterous group of us had.

He took one short break to have a bite to eat.

Melissa grinned at me. “I saw the guitar in your apartment. Let's see what you got.”

“No way.”

“Come on... I am going to get you to do it eventually,” she explained confidently. “Why fight me?”

“Not a chance, lady.”

“Bran-don! Bran-don!” She started the chant.

And, because it is easy to get a bunch of drunks to chant just about anything, the entire pub soon joined in.

Oliver held out his guitar to me.

“This is a big mistake,” I said, taking it from him.

Melissa “Whoooooo”ed.

“You may be whoooing too soon,” I muttered.

Before I could lose the nerve, I launched into a relatively decent version of America's “Sister Golden Hair.”

Everyone sang along with me and cheered loudly when I was done.

So I performed it three more times.

What? It's the only song that I know how to play.

Melissa sang just as enthusiastically, and smiled just as big, the entire time.

It was one of those nights that, if you tried to plan it, would never turn out that well. Even now, I find it hard to put my finger on what exactly made the night magical.

Good beer and good times with good people, maybe?

I sneakily bought Oliver's CD after the show and gave it to Melissa on the way home.

And then we kissed.

I mean, there had been little “good night” kisses after the first and second dates. But this one... This one was different.

There was a sweet urgency. It was fueled by intensity and desire and fate.

I wish there was a less clichéd way to say that I felt changed. But, sadly, that's all you get.

We were in the middle of the sidewalk. There were people walking by on both sides of us.

Melissa later told me that was the night she fell in love with me.

And now Oliver was here, at the apartment, with his guitar slung over his shoulder..

“Hey, Brandon.”

“Ollie! Come in, man.”

Melissa stood up from her seat. She looked back and forth from me to Oliver.

“What are you doing here?”

“Ollie was just in town, sweetie.”

“How have you guys been?” he asked, receiving a hug from Melissa.

“Good,” she replied, still a little in shock.

“Ollie, could we trouble you to play a song for us?”

“Absolutely.”

I led Oliver to the chair opposite the couch onto which Melissa had just hopped. I joined her.

Oliver lightly strummed his guitar. “Well, this is a new song. Very new. And the lyrics were written for me by a friend.”

Oliver looked at me. Melissa caught him and then she looked at me incredulously.

He launched into the song.

His voice sounded perfect. The guitar playing was bang on. The music he created to go along with my words was far more amazing than I had dared hope for. I had written of finding love, the deep earth-shaking kind. I had written of the future and forever. I had even worked in a line from Robert Frost, as Melissa adores him. And Oliver added depth and weight to my words. It was affecting me more than I expected.

As Oliver played the final chord, I saw Melissa well up a bit too.

“Well, guys, I have a show tonight.” He started putting his guitar over his shoulder when Melissa gave him another hug.

“Thank you, Oliver. So much.”

“My pleasure. You guys have a great night, OK?”

As Melissa wiped her eyes, I walked Oliver to the door.

“Man, I owe you. That was so perfect. You're a genius.”

“I was happy to do it.”

“You ever need anything, you have my e-mail address. A place to stay in the city. Bail money. You name it.”

“Brandon, I'd love to use your washroom, if I could.”

“Yeah, I kind of have a schedule going here. There's a bathroom in the Chinese food restaurant on the corner. Mention my name. Try the Peking duck. Thanks again. Great seeing you. Now, get the hell out of here, man.”

I slapped him on the back and shoved him out the door.

I walked back to the living room. Melissa greeted me with the fourth greatest kiss in the history of lips.

“Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. I needed this night, Brandon.”

“It's not over yet.”

“It's not?”

“You think my girl doesn't get dessert?”

“Ooooh.”

She took her seat at the table. “Garçon!”

“This is going to take me a few minutes. Can you be patient?”

“Maybe,” she said with an impish grin.

I quickly hit the kitchen and got to work. I had timed everything out perfectly. I hoped.

I plated the dessert, let out a long exhale, and headed back.

“What is it? I've been waiting soooo long,” she faux-whined.

“Well, I seem to remember someone being a big fan of poached and caramelized peaches and pears...”

“No way!”

“Indeed.”

She took the plate out of my hand.

“How did you... I mean... You can’t cook!”

I laughed. “Thanks.”

“I mean, before tonight. How did you do all this? And Oliver? And the song??” She took a bite. “It’s yummy!”

“Yay!”

“Brandon... how did you do all of this?”

“It just took the proper inspiration.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too, Melissa.”

“And I love this dessert!”

As we ate in contented silence, I took the opportunity to initiate a little game of “footsies.”

When Melissa finished her last bite, she said, “This has been one of the best nights of my life.”

“I’m so glad, Mel.”

“That you would go through all of this trouble...”

“It was no trouble.”

“I’m just so happy that you are in my life.”

“I feel blessed to be here, Melissa. Truly. I think about that a lot. I’ve always been a bit of a romantic. I think that I knew, without knowing, that you were out there. I don’t think that I knew that you would be so amazing, or that you would have such an impact on my life. And for that, and much more, I am so very thankful.”

I took a deep breath before continuing, “You’ve given meaning to the meaningless. You’ve given me hope when it seemed like little existed. When anything happens to me, good or bad, my first thought is to share it with you. My heart still races every time you walk into the room. I don’t remember my life before you, and I don’t ever want to even imagine a future without you.”

“Awwww, sweetie,” she purred.

“You are brilliant and sweet and creative and the kind of beautiful that breaks my heart a little every time I look at you. You are more than I deserve but everything I could ever want. I love you fully and completely, with all of my heart.”

Then I pulled out a ring.

The ring.

It was the only ring I had ever seen that I felt was truly worthy of sitting on her finger.

The candlelight was hitting the diamond just perfectly.

I took her hand.

“Melissa, I love you. Will you marry me?”

She put her hands to her cheeks, and they were quickly covered with tears. Her mouth opened, but she didn't speak.

An infinity passed.

I leaned forward, trying to coax the answer out of her.

“No,” she whispered.

No.

She said no.

She said NO!

She sobbed loudly, as she ran into her bedroom.

I am not sure that “heartbreak” is how I would describe what I was feeling. “Break” would give one the impression of something that happened and then was over.

This pain didn't end.

It got worse.

And I felt so cold.

I don't really remember much of what happened at that point. I vaguely recall trying to put cling wrap on something in the kitchen.

And then I just left.

I had no idea where I was going, but I knew that I couldn't be there any longer.

I remember the taste of tequila in my mouth.

I remember wearing a pink boa at one point.

Other parts are a little sketchy.

After leaving the apartment, I eventually found a bar. And, in the cruelest twist of fate, I met up with a group of women in the midst of a bachelorette party.

It just so happens that the bartender in the place I picked is good friends with Leo. And, at some point during the festivities, he called my brother and told him about the state I was in.

When I arrived, I ordered five shots. They did not last long.

Soon after, I was buying drinks for the place and telling one and all about “the woman who ruined my life.” I was showing the ring to everyone. I was singing along to Elton John songs on the jukebox.

At some point during the debauchery, one of the bridesmaids took a liking to me. I have a fuzzy recollection that the woman looked like Anne Hathaway.

I spent a lot of time with the bridesmaids but more so with that one than the others. We huddled alone in a corner booth. In hindsight, she was a little bit all over me.

She even got me to dance. Something that requires me to be freshman-girl-during-her-first-weekend-at-college-and-her-father-is-the-minister-dude-from-Footloose levels of drunk.

I know.

I do.

I shouldn't have been there. I shouldn't have run out on Melissa. I shouldn't have gotten Irish-writer drunk. (Even though I am, technically, an Irish writer.) I shouldn't have gone to that bar. I shouldn't have befriended a bridal party.

And I certainly shouldn't have been slow dancing with some equally drunk future bridesmaid.

We danced. We got closer. You know the way. She grabbed the back of my head and pulled me closer and--

“What in the hell are you doing?”

I turned and Leo was there.

“Leo--”

“We're leaving,” he said.

The woman protested, “He is happy with me right here.”

“You go away now,” Leo replied.

“Leo, you should be nice to her. We've bonded. I feel closer to Elizabeth than anyone on earth right now.”

“My name is Lauren,” she said.

“That's super,” I smiled.

Leo pointed to the door. The door he later claimed “accidentally closed” and caused the lump on my head.

I deserved whatever “the door” gave me.

Leo got me back to my long-abandoned apartment and a little drunken guilt-doubt began to set in.

“Did I... do anything?”

“You didn't.”

“Are you sure?”

“I double-checked with the bartender.”

“I'm sorry, Leo.”

“I know, buddy.”

“Just hurts, you know?”

“I know. We'll talk about it tomorrow.”

Leo left and I ventured to the fridge because I was suddenly parched. As I drank out of the container of milk, I was quickly reminded that I hadn't been inside the apartment in about a month.

It was easily the loudest, and most obnoxious, ringing that I had ever heard in my life. It was echoing. And it just wouldn't stop. I tried to close my ears.

It was at that point that I noticed that blinding headache. Still, I bravely soldiered on and attempted to open my eyes. One at a time, at first. Once they were open, I began the onerous task of getting them to focus.

I saw something shiny and white. I hated how bright it was.

I reached out and touched it. Cold.

As I slowly came to the realization that it was my toilet, I noticed that I was half-assedly wrapped in a bathmat.

From my position on the floor, my bathroom began to come into focus. It needed a good cleaning.

And then the ringing started again. Louder. More persistent.

After searching -- without actually moving -- for way longer than a bathroom that small should ever require, I spotted my phone on the side of the tub.

I grabbed it.

“Hello?” My voice came out hoarse and angry.

“Brandon?”

It was Melissa.

“Hi...”

“I know that things are weird right now...” And then she burst into tears.

Any anger or coldness I felt was immediately washed away. “What is it, sweetie?”

“There... There was a cancellation. My chemo starts today.” She attempted to sound strong.

“Wow. That was quick.”

“Yeah. And I--”

“I’ll be there,” I said, as I tried to sit up.

“Really? It’s just that we--”

“When and where, baby?”

She was crying again. “Thank you.”

After getting the information from her, I hung up. I stared at the ceiling for a few seconds. I ignored what was clearly a mold outbreak and managed to get to my feet.

I looked in the mirror and saw shame, regret, brokenness, fear, confusion, thankfulness, disgust, and strength.

A little strength anyway.

I took an uncharacteristically short shower, found the bump on my head, jumped into some clothes, and headed out the door.

Jim was waiting outside the hospital's main entrance when I arrived.

He spotted me approaching. He did the sideways nod towards the entrance and we walked in.

We silently rode the elevator.

We silently walked down the hall.

He silently walked into the room where Catherine and Melissa were sitting.

I stopped at the door.

I tried to will my legs to carry me in.

And then she looked at me.

Within seconds, I was sitting beside her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"Me too."

"Can I explain?"

"Later, sweetie. We have things to take care of now."

She put her head on my shoulder.

The chemo technician arrived. The blood work had come back. She said that all systems were "go."

She explained the process. Catherine scowled. Jim stared. Melissa listened.

As I heard "Melissa, some people react fairly badly to this one. It's rough," I locked in.

I rubbed her back.

As we arrived at Melissa's apartment, she had one request.

“Couch.”

She was tired. Perhaps as much emotionally as from the actual treatment.

She fell asleep immediately.

I left her a note and her phone nearby, saying that I was running down to the grocery store on the corner.

As I marched into the store, I tried to remember everything I had read on chemo websites and in the pamphlet at the hospital.

Small meals. Dry foods. Stuff to drink. No tomatoes. *Never* tomatoes.

I quickly loaded my cart and paid for my groceries and half-ran down the block. She had already been alone longer than I wanted.

I quietly let myself in and found her still asleep on the couch.

On the kitchen table, I unpacked my six bags of groceries.

Cereal. Bread. Bagels. Crackers. Ginger. Peppermint. Yogurt. Smoothie fixings. Soups. And fourteen different flavors of sports drinks.

As I searched my memory for anything I might have forgotten, I heard Melissa stirring.

“Brandon...” came out very low.

“Hi.”

“I don't feel well.”

I helped her up and we made our way to the bathroom. She knelt in front of the toilet. I sat on the tub, rubbing her back.

“It's coming,” she whimpered.

“We're in the right place for it.”

And then she let loose. She was power puking. And she was crying.

I held her hair for her.

She kept puking. And crying.

“Melissa, is that...? Did you have Lucky Charms for breakfast?”

"I am going to kill you," she growled.

"Please. As if you'd have the energy."

When she was actually finished -- not the three false-alarm finishes -- I brushed her teeth and washed her face.

I mostly carried her to the couch.

"I don't like chemo, Brandon."

"I know, baby." I forced a smile. "On the plus side, maybe you'll glow in the dark."

"That's radiation."

"So no super powers either?"

"Probably not."

"Bummer."

When she was comfortable on the couch, I kissed her forehead.

"I'm going to go get you a cold cloth."

No matter how many times you have seen it with other people in the past, or how much you try to brace yourself, there is no way to be completely prepared for losing your hair. At least not at the rate it was falling out of Melissa's head.

Each morning, I tried to surreptitiously brush her pillow off before she noticed. It rarely worked.

She tried hard on a daily basis to hide the bald patches that were forming. Different styles. Up, down. Headbands that were increasing in size every day.

Finally, she stood in the bedroom doorway one morning. "It is winning."

"It's just hair, sweetie."

"I know, Brandon. It's just... the less sick I look in the mirror, the less sick I feel, you know?"

"I get it."

"The makeup almost covers the dark circles under my eyes. But the hair clumps..." Her voice got quieter.

“Hair, no hair, you knock me on my ass, every time I look at you.”

“Thanks.”

“Consuela can take your hair now. You are just going to kick her evil ass and grow it all back. Knowing you, it'll probably look even hotter.” Even I knew that I wasn't helping.

“I love you.” She humored me.

“Ooh. I have an idea.”

“That's never good.”

“Let's shave it off, Mel.”

“What?”

“Take control of your hair today. You decide when it comes off. Not some disease. Not some treatment. It is your hair.”

“OK...”

“Yeah?”

“OK!”

“Let's hit my barber, Lucky.”

“What about Phillippe?” she asked.

“You want to pay a hundred bucks for a quick clipping?”

Melissa laughed, possibly at my low estimate. “OK. Let's do this!”

Before she could change her mind, I grabbed her hand and led her out of the apartment.

It was only a couple blocks away.

Lucky, at least in his youth, was six foot eight. He's in his seventies now. Strong southern accent. He was sweeping up and gave us an up-nod and a smile as we entered.

I bumped into Melissa as she stopped dead in the middle of the shop.

“What is it, Mel?”

“I'm not sure if I can go through with this.”

“No?”

“It's a big deal. I've had long hair since I was ten.”

“Hmmm. What if I go first?”

“You don't need a haircut, Brandon.”

“I'm shaving it.”

“What? Why?”

“Solidarity, yo.”

“But then I'll have Consuela AND a hard-looking bald boyfriend.”

“Oh, make no mistake, I have a pretty sexy head, lady.”

“So you say...”

“Maybe Lucky will let you do some of the shaving.”

“Sure thing,” Lucky smiled.

This intrigued her.

Three and a half minutes later, most of my hair was gone and Melissa was giggling nervously with the clippers in her hand.

“Ow!”

“What is it, Brandon?!”

“You dinged my ear.”

“Oh no! Did I really?”

“Naw.”

She playfully slapped me on the back of the head. “Jerk.”

And then she was done.

I rubbed my head as I looked in the mirror.

“Wow. Melissa... You are *so* lucky to have a boyfriend as handsome as I am.”

“Oh God...”

“It's true!”

Lucky took the plastic smock thing off of me and brushed my hair off the chair. “Are you next?” he asked Melissa.

“Will you hold my hand?” She looked at me with those eyes.

“Always.”

The entire process had some ups and downs.

She laughed when I fashioned a rat-tail for myself with a lock of her hair.

And she cried. A few times.

I squeezed her hand. She squeezed back.

And then it was finished.

“You still look gorgeous, sweetie.”

Her eyes said that she didn't believe me.

She fished a NY Yankees baseball cap out of her purse, as I handed money to Lucky.

He wouldn't take it.

“Look after that girl, son. She's a good one.”

I shook his hand.

As we left, I stopped her on the sidewalk.

“Billy Corgan, Smashing Pumpkins.”

“I'm not doing it,” she replied and started walking.

“Is that so?”

I offered my hand to every person we met on the sidewalk, repeating, “Billy Corgan, Smashing Pumpkins.”

I was met with blank stares, confused faces, and one “The hell you are, asshole.”

After I shook the hand of a cop, Melissa had enough.

“Fine...”

I smirked at her. “Billy Corgan, Smashing Pumpkins.”

“Homer Simpson, smiling politely,” she sighed.

“That's my girl!”

I hugged her around the shoulders and we walked home.

Catherine gives so much advice, and so many recommendations, that occasionally you just have to relent. Otherwise she'll just give you more of both.

Then possibly she'll make a voodoo doll of you.

And, if it is my likeness she is using, she'll work the groin area.

Catherine's friend recommended a wig shop. And even though Catherine's friend is fifty-seven years old and owns a pink pair of sweat pants with “Diva” written across the bum, that is where we found ourselves.

At the wig shop. Not her bum. I hope that was clear.

“What do you think of this one?” Melissa asked, with more than a little bit of an evil glint in her eyes.

I thought for a moment. “Joe Dirt is going to be super pissed that you stole his mullet.”

She scrunched her nose at me. I live in awe of her nose scrunch.

I tried one on. It was long and black and covered most of my face.

“Mel, you like?”

“She's got a smile that, it seems to me, reminds me of childhood memories.”

And so it went. I tried one on. Then she tried one on. Then the shop lady rolled her eyes.

Placing another on my head, “Mel?”

“Oh! You look like one of the 'whoop! whoop!' eye-poke guys.”

I stared for a few moments. “The Stooges?”

“Yeah.”

I stared for another few moments.

“Was I aware that you don't know The Three Stooges?”

“Whatever, dude.”

As I tried to forget that troubling fact, I reached for a Farah Fawcett-looking piece of hair art.

“Brandon...”

I turned. I smiled. She had found the one.

It was long. It was blond. It looked natural.

“That's it, Mel.”

“You think?”

“It is *almost* pretty enough to go with that face.”

You are probably wondering about the Titanic of proposals.

Well, we did discuss it. Sort of.

We discussed discussing it. And even that was torture.

Melissa got as far as, “About that night...” before bursting into tears. After a few minutes, she managed to get out some silliness about me feeling “obligated” to marry her. For such an intelligent woman...

Even though it felt like my guts were being ripped out with a pair of scorching hot pliers, I floated the idea that we pretend that it didn't happen and that we go back to “normal.”

Melissa was visibly relieved.

I was...

Well, I didn't want to break up.

So the ring went into the world's saddest dresser drawer. Hole-filled socks and threadbare boxer shorts seemed like the perfect neighbors for it.

“Is your hand on my butt?” Melissa whispered from her side of the bed.

“A lot of things are a lot of places. It's hard to keep track,” I replied dopily.

“It definitely feels like your hand is on my butt.”

“Hands sometimes end up places. We live in an imperfect world.”

“If you are so good at reading me, read me right now.”

I pretended to concentrate. “Melissa! Wherever are we going to get a rodeo clown and a feather duster this time of night?”

“I don't want you to see me naked,” she said quietly.

“That's totally not a deal breaker.”

“I'm just... really not in the mood to do anything.”

“Really? Because I was thinking about going an entirely different way.” I smiled and spooned her, nuzzling my nose against the back of her neck.

“I don't feel very sexy.”

“That's fine. I feel sexy enough for the both of us.”

“You're a goof,” she sighed.

“Maybe a little.”

I was so cozy that I started to drift off a little. Then she whispered again. “You know...”

“Yeah?”

“I think there's a copy of *People* magazine in the bathroom. Just in case you need some alone time. I know how much of a fan you are.”

“Mmmmm,” I fake-moaned. “Oh!”

“What?”

“Giada!”

I grabbed the remote and turned on the TV.

“You aren't really going to use the cooking channel for inspiration?”

“Don’t you judge me,” I said then turned back to Giada. “That’s it... Braise that shit, baby.”

Melissa’s body ached constantly. So, a few nights later, I started sleeping on the floor on an air mattress. She said that it wasn’t necessary but not very convincingly.

It was a Tuesday night. It was almost midnight.

I was just beginning to fall asleep.

And then I heard it.

It was hard not to. It was loud. It was unmistakable.

Melissa broke wind.

“Tell me that you are asleep!” she demanded.

“I’m asleep,” I replied.

“Oh God! Oh God! You didn’t hear that!”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Why?? Why did you hear that??”

I got up and kissed her on the forehead. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“I know that you’ve held my hair when I puked, but...”

I kissed her forehead again. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“You’ll never see me as a woman again.”

I kissed her on the forehead yet again. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Oh God. I’m hyperventilating!”

Another forehead kiss. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“OK. OK. I’m going to be OK.” She took a deep breath. “We can go to sleep now.”

I settled back down on the air mattress. She wiped a few tears from her eyes.

A few moments of silence passed.

“Brandon, that really was kind of loud.”

“I think it set off a car alarm two blocks over.”

When I was a kid, I used to torture my mother when she would take me to a store. I even did it when I was a teenager... and a few weeks ago.

I would load the cart with all manner of embarrassing or expensive items. Whatever I saw that amused me, I'd grab. It could be hemorrhoid cream, athlete's foot spray, fifteen boxes of condoms... I even once tried to put a toboggan in with my mother's food order.

This typically left her someplace south of impressed with me.

However, that did nothing to prepare me for this particular trip to the grocery store.

The day started badly for Melissa. And, of course, by extension...

While I was shaving, and singing “Teenage Dirtbag,” she burst into the bathroom. This is clearly not what you want, or expect, to happen while you have sharpened metal blades against your neck. I was informed that I had left less than a quarter of a cup of milk in the container without adding it to the shopping list. Apparently this was a bad thing.

A very bad thing.

Immediately after she stormed out, I came to a terrifying realization. “Crap! I hope she doesn't check the orange juice!”

The rest of the morning didn't go any better. She glowered at me for whistling. She growled (seriously!) when I accidentally spilled a few drops of my coffee. She yelled at me for leaving the light on in one room and screamed at me for shutting the light off in another. And when she gave me a dismissive eye roll -- for the crime of telling her that she looked pretty -- she looked exactly like her mother.

I neglected to mention that fact to her.

Despite the glaring warning signs, I offered to go grocery shopping with her. (My first stops, obviously, would be to buy milk and orange juice.)

She replied, “Fine.”

I could feel the love.

The walk to the store was quiet. No talking at all. Still, I could feel her anger growing.

It was as if you had poked a bear and were waiting for it to attack.

Actually, it was more like you had poked a bear, insulted its family, and then took a dump in its shoe.

Or something.

I pushed the cart around the store. I also reached everything on upper shelves and grabbed everything even slightly heavy.

Melissa complained about prices and other shoppers.

And then it happened.

Whenever Catherine came to visit, she expected a certain brand of coffee. And she would absolutely know if you tried to substitute another kind. And she would act as if it was a personal affront.

We arrived at the spot on the shelf where this coffee had always lived. It wasn't there.

Melissa turned red.

“Hang on, Mel. Let me go check with someone here. Maybe they have some in the back.”

She just nodded.

I almost had to dragoon an overpoweringly weed-reeking stock boy into going to check for me. Despite my doubts about his ability to find his way back, he eventually returned.

“Sorry, dude.”

Melissa was enraged. She couldn't take any more. And she lost it.

“Dammit!”

“Melissa, we can go to another store.”

“I don't want to go to another store! I want this store to have some fucking coffee! Is that too much to ask for?”

“No. It's just--”

“Why are you talking?! You have been nothing but a pain in my ass all day. Are you doing it on purpose?? Are you? I think you are. You just want to try my nerves today.”

She kicked over a display of flavored coffees. A small crowd was beginning to gather.

She was really screaming now. “With all the countries in the world exporting coffee, why can't I just get the kind I want, Brandon? Screw this! You know what? You can go straight to hell! You and Juan Valdez both! I am done!”

She kicked a can of flavored coffee out of the way and slumped to the floor.

The gathering crowd had grown.

I gave them a dirty look and waved them away. “Get out of here. There's nothing to see.”

I took a seat on the floor next to Melissa. She was still absolutely seething.

“It's not fair, you know?”

“I know, Mel.”

“I'm a good person!”

“Yup.”

“This sucks,” she said quietly.

We sat there for a while.

“Is it possible, Mel, that you aren't really mad at the coffee bean farmer, or even at me?”

“Maybe...” she sniffled. “Bu, you both fucked up pretty badly.”

“Fair enough.”

I helped her to her feet.

I pulled her in close and put my forehead against hers.

I whispered, “You have to be nicer to me. I'm really trying.”

The next evening at dinner, things were still a little frosty.

Melissa had cooked. She chose quiche -- mostly because I hate it.

We ate in a silence punctuated only by fork on plate and my occasional feigned “Mmmmm”s.

There was a knocking at the door.

Melissa looked at me. I shrugged.

I got up and went to check.

It was Melissa's college roommate, Caitlyn. A tall and pretty brunette. She brushed past me.

“Brandon, be a lamb and fix me a martini. (I did.) Mel! You look gorgeous! I am sorry I haven't been around more. I've been in Europe. Such a pain. Too many Europeans. I need to borrow a dress. I have this thing. Boring. I was on my way and saw this stain. I'm... still not sure what it is. Now I need to change. Oh, don't get up. I know where your closet is. (She kept talking from the bedroom.) And this event tonight? The worst. It is for work, so I am in charge. Lecherous old millionaires, with bad comb-overs and reeking of rye and disdain, pawing at me. And I can't even get sloppy drunk. Hey, what's with you two? You look all somber and shit. Things not going well? Little squabbles? Well, suck it up. You dorks have a good thing going. You think it is better out there? It's like Thunderdome with a three date rule. Anarchy. It's all, “Yeah, you were great, dear.” And “Sure that is average size.” Average size if you are in kindergarten or just completed your first Polar Bear swim. Last week I went on a date with a Trekkie. And I knew it beforehand. Set your phasers to 'Are you freakin' kidding me?' I mean, I am sure it was a thrill for him. I looked spectacular in that dress. I would have done me. And I am so damn sick of small talk. I make shit up now. I think I am done with it. No more making conversation. I am going to send these unlucky bastards a link to my blog the day before the date. Read that shit. I met a guy the other night, and he told me that he was having impure thoughts about me. I was all, “That was honest.” He was all, “There is nothing sexier than the truth... except for maybe the truth dressed as a naughty librarian.” So I slept with him. (She arrived back in the kitchen in a black dress.) If I had known I was this good at faking orgasms, I would have majored in theater. You know? So, whatever is bothering you two, work it the hell out. You annoying, adorable bastards were made for each other. You make me sick. If you ever break up, I'll kill yas. I love you both.”

She took the martini from my hand and downed it. She performed the ol' lift and separate with her breasts and gave me a wink.

“It's go time, bitches.”

Then she turned and left.

Melissa stared at the door.

I stared at the empty glass in my hand.

“Whoa.”

When two people are not getting along super well, it is always a great idea to cram them both in a small metal box with wheels and have them spend a day alone together.

Right?

Still, Caitlyn's speech had lightened the mood. A little.

Melissa wanted to get out of the city. I wanted Melissa to get what she wanted. We loaded up the car

with snacks, and I made a road-trip playlist on the iPod. Melissa was a bit nauseous so we delayed our departure but, once she was ready, we hit the road.

The weather was gorgeous. The traffic was light. The music had a very 80s vibe.

We sang. I drove. We held hands. It felt a little forced, frankly, but it was better than fighting.

Melissa didn't like the air conditioning so, instead, we had our windows down. Wind whipped through the car. Melissa was wearing her wig and the breeze was blowing strands of hair into her face. She smiled that gorgeous smile as she moved them gently away with her hand.

"I didn't think I'd have to do that for a while."

Scenery flew by for hours, taking our worries with it.

But then Melissa got quiet.

"Are you OK?"

"I think so. Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Pull over!" she yelled.

Too late.

She threw up suddenly on the floor between her feet.

She started crying.

"Melissa, it is fine."

"No... I'm sorry."

"Seriously. Not a big deal."

"Oh no... my shoes."

I pulled into a nearby convenience store.

I sent Melissa, in her bare feet, over to a little picnic table at the edge of the parking lot.

I ran inside and bought some cleaning supplies and got to work.

I don't have a very strong stomach, but I soldiered on. And she was watching from across the parking lot, so I had to look tough.

“Think non-pukey thoughts... Think non-pukey thoughts...”

I got it done. I even managed to scrub her shoes clean.

I picked up my cleaning supplies and opened the back windows of the car. I carried Melissa's shoes over to her.

“How about we let it air out for a bit? Six or seven days, maybe. Feel up to going in the store to do some browsing?”

“OK. But I am sweating too much for this wig. Block for me.”

So I stood and made sure that passersby couldn't see her switch from her wig to her bandanna.

“Thanks, sweetie.”

She stuffed her wig in her purse. She took my hand and we walked together.

“We might want to spring for a car air freshener, Brandon.”

“It's not our car,” I grinned.

We strolled around the aisles of the smallish store. She looked through the magazines. I tried on sunglasses. We sang along to songs playing on the radio in the store. All classic rock, all the time, apparently.

However, our fun -- and my impressive knowledge of Eagles lyrics -- was interrupted by three frat boy types. Early twenties. They were roughhousing loudly as they arrived.

When they walked by, the biggest redheaded one stopped and looked at Melissa. “Sinead.”

Then his buddies started laughing. I took a step towards him, but Melissa grabbed my arm.

“Let it go, Brandon.”

Red laughed again. “Do, what Cue Ball says, Bran-don.”

The three of them walked to the back of the store, guffawing.

I raged.

Melissa un-fisted my hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Let's go,” she whispered.

We grabbed an air freshener and some drinks, paid for our items, and headed out to the car.

As I was opening the car door for her, I said, “Damn. I forgot to get some gum, Mel.”

“Oh, OK.”

I helped her into the car. She was hanging the air freshener when I closed the door and headed back inside.

Red saw me returning, from the back of the store. He poked his short buddy in the side as I walked up. “Oh. Are you allowed to say somethi--”

I punched him square in the jaw.

Hard.

He fell backwards, knocking over a rack of potato chips and landing flat on his back on the floor.

I glared down at him. I wished that he would get up.

He wouldn't move.

I turned to his friends. Neither would look me in the eye.

“Good choice.”

I turned and walked to the cash register. I passed the man twenty bucks. “I'm sorry, sir.”

When I got to the car, Melissa was smiling.

“Where is your gum?”

“Oh, they didn't have the kind I like.” I turned the key in the ignition. “Ready to head home? Your apartment awaits.”

“Yup. But don't you think it is *our* apartment by this point?”

I liked that.

The ride home was refreshingly unremarkable.

We listened to more music. I ignored the ache in my knuckles. Melissa put her head on my shoulder.

As we got closer to home, we could see the outline of the city in the dusk sky. It looked warm. Inviting.

“Brandon... I don't think this air freshener is doing much.”

“It smells like we've been transporting yaks.”

I may have mentioned that Melissa is particular about the way that her apartment is cleaned.

And, from the data I have gathered, she is especially displeased with my methods. Which, I assume, she would compare to the potential success rate of a dog making an omelet. One of the fancy ones with the mushrooms with French names.

I've never been super tidy, I'll admit. I was the dude hauling dirty laundry four hours home from college to get my mother to wash it. What? Skipping class and playing pick-up basketball wears a guy out.

It doesn't take me too many screw-ups (seven at last count) to realize that maybe I should try a different tack.

One night, as Melissa slept, I contacted a cleaning lady used by my brother's shrew-wife. I arranged for her to come over and clean the apartment a few days later, on a day when Catherine was dragging Melissa to a shoe sale.

That morning, Catherine arrived with a frenzied look in her eyes, a credit card of a color I could never qualify for, and what I think was pepper spray.

“I'm ready. Are you ready, dear?”

Melissa yawned, “Yup.”

I kissed her on the forehead as she gave me a hug. “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” she whispered as the door closed behind her.

I've heard people talk of tidying up before allowing someone to clean their home. I wondered if, finding myself in that position, I would do the same thing.

Nope.

I was eating a couple of chocolate Pop-Tarts -- without a plate -- on the couch, and watching *Saved By The Bell: The College Years* when the cleaning lady showed up.

Dianka arrived precisely at the time she had given me. She cut a sturdy figure, standing in the doorway holding a mop and a bucket full of cleaning accoutrements.

“Hello. Can I start?” she asked in an accent vaguely reminiscent of a villain in a Steven Seagal film.

“Oh, yes. Absolutely. Do you need any--?”

“For you to stay out of way.”

“I am spectacularly good at disappearing when the work begins.”

She ignored me and started unpacking her supplies.

“The bathroom is in there and --”

“I find. I find.”

“Would it be easier if I just left?” I mostly wondered aloud.

“Yes.”

I guess that answered that.

I had some initial misgivings about turning the place over to a complete stranger. I mean, what if she found my collection of por-- valuable baseball cards?

Then I remembered that my she-devil-in-law allowed her to clean their apartment. That means that there were reference checks, background checks and, quite possibly, urine checks.

I grabbed my laptop and headed down to the courtyard.

It was one of those days. The sky was cloudless and seemed impossibly big. The sun was stunningly bright but appeared almost small in relation. The air was the kind of warm that made you wonder why you'd ever want to go back inside. Everything seemed to move just a step slower than usual.

Children played. Birds chirped. Even the traffic seemed content to be nothing but light background noise.

And I started writing.

The words poured out. It must have lasted two hours. I was interrupted only once by a curious dog that sniffed my sneakers and then happily ran off.

At that point, I began wondering how Dianka was doing. I closed my laptop and headed upstairs.

Now, I was not born with what one would call “good timing.” Or the ability to digest corn.

I heard the yelling as I walked down the hallway. Two very distinct languages. One emotion.

“Put my shoes DOWN!” Melissa bellowed.

“I clean. I clean closet!” Dianka protested.

My stomach flopped.

Despite a growing urge to head off in another direction, I ran into the apartment. They were each holding a red high-heeled slingback.

“Whoa, whoa,” I said.

They both glared at me angrily.

“Get... her... out... of... here...” Melissa growled.

Dianka dropped the shoe. She gathered up her cleaning supplies and walked over to me. She had fire in her eyes as she held out her hand.

I gave her every penny that I had on me. Neither of us bothered to count it.

Then she yelled at me in her mother tongue. I didn't understand a single word, of course, but I would be extremely surprised if it didn't involve telling me to perform a procreative impossibility on myself.

And then, in a trail of rage and Pine-Sol, she was gone.

I turned to Melissa, “Well, that was awk--”

“What the hell were you thinking?”

“You were never happy with how I cleaned the place.”

“And you thought THIS was a better idea?”

“Well... yeah. And what happened to it being *our* apartment?”

“I don't even—” And then she GRRRRRed.

“Listen, Mel, people hire cleaners all the time. Your mother does it,” I replied, starting to lose my patience a little.

“I don't know if I am madder at you for bringing a stranger into *our* home, or for comparing me to my mother.”

“Well, give it some thought and get back to me.” I grabbed my laptop and headed back down to the courtyard.

Have you ever been out doing something when you suddenly get a feeling that somewhere, somehow, the world is winding up to kick you in the danglies?

I got that feeling one morning when I was out for a run.

I had just looked at my watch when I felt a cold chill go down my spine. It was an unmistakable feeling of dread.

For the rest of my run, I avoided stepping on cracks or running near black cats or under ladders.

I managed to make it home in one piece.

And then I found out that Catherine had invited us over for dinner.

And, worse still, Melissa had accepted.

Ouch.

Even though Melissa and I were not getting along well, I vowed to myself that this time I wasn't going to take Catherine's bait. Things were bad enough already. I was going to be calm and cool. I was going to shave and wear a sports coat.

Despite the fact that his worse-half was still complaining about the puke smell, we again borrowed Leo's car.

As we drove out, I was getting the feeling that Melissa was dreading it as much as I was. Well, she may have been dreading it *almost* as much as I was.

She looked as if she was feeling a bit down. I made some jokes and tried to act silly. I knew that we'd need to be in the best moods possible to deal with Catherine.

It helped a little. She cracked one smile.

I parked the car in the driveway and we walked to the door.

Catherine had been waiting and watching. She opened the door immediately.

I got myself mentally prepared. Melissa walked in first.

“Hi, Mom.”

“Melissa. You are almost late.”

I resisted the urge to say, “Isn't 'almost late' the exact same thing as, I don't know, 'RIGHT ON TIME!' perhaps?”

Catherine and I didn't look at each other as I entered.

It was going to be a long evening.

Melissa and Catherine ventured into one of the many sitting rooms. I began the pilgrimage to Jim's

lair.

I found him watching pre-season NFL football.

I took a seat. Jim glanced over out of the corner of his eye. I didn't say a word. He seemed surprised by this. Well, at least as surprised as Jim gets.

The more I tried to talk myself into a good, and patient, mood, the crankier I got. That did not bode well for running the dinner gauntlet.

After a while, Melissa arrived at the door. "Time to eat, guys."

She looked even more tired than she had when we arrived.

The three of us walked to the dining room, where Catherine greeted us by looking at her watch.

As usual, Catherine stared swords at me. "Do you really think that driving around everywhere the other day was a good idea when Melissa has been so tired?"

Don't be snarky, Brandon. Don't be snarky.

"You do realize she was actually in the car and not running alongside?" I asked.

Crap.

"She is going through treatment!"

"Really? I hadn't picked up on that, Catherine. I mean, I thought the baldness was a bold choice, but whatever..."

"Brandon..." Melissa said quietly.

I nodded. I knew. I was going to have to do better.

And I did.

I ignored Catherine's digs during appetizers. I ignored her more obvious comments during the main course. But, by dessert time, I was at the end of my rope.

"Bringing in a house cleaner was insulting. It was a complete slap in the face," Catherine muttered, completely out of the blue, over some kind of cake-in-sauce dessert.

"Jesus... You fire like three maids a week. We were just trying to follow in your footsteps."

"Brandon, please." Melissa grabbed my arm. "If you are so good at reading me, read me now."

"I don't like your attitude." Catherine's voice got louder.

“Oh, I don't care anymore.”

“Brandon, stop.” Melissa squeezed my arm harder and angry-whispered, “Fucking read me!”

Catherine put her fork down. “It's always jokes with you. You haven't taken this seriously from the start.”

“Are you kidding me? I don't take it seriously?!”

“Brandon!” Melissa yelled and looked me in the eyes.

“That's what I said,” Catherine sneered.

I was too far gone. The ups and downs had just been too much. “Lady, I've been there every single day. Not like you. Sitting back and lobbing shots. Judging. Complaining. I've had enough of you. You are nothing but an evil, controlling BITCH!”

Silence.

I looked at Melissa, but she turned away.

Uh oh.

I put down my fork. I got up from my chair.

“I'm leaving. Mel?”

“I'm staying.” She still wouldn't look at me.

“You know what? Fine.”

I stomped off in such a manner that would have even impressed a fourteen-year-old girl.

I got in the car. I put the key in the ignition.

Oh crap.

A wiser man would have gone back inside and apologized to his girlfriend. A more mature man would have faced the music and admitted that he had overreacted.

“Fuck that.”

I started the car and drove home.

There are times in life when you know that you are wrong and, frankly, being an ass about it.

I knew that this was one of those times for me.

I knew it alone in bed the next morning.

I composed fun apologetic text messages in my head. I took pictures of my apologetic sad face. I even took a picture of me holding her favorite shoes over the toilet.

I didn't send any of them.

I'm still not sure why.

I'm a bit lazy, self-absorbed, smug, sarcastic, devastatingly handsome, and lactose intolerant, but I am not usually stubborn.

And yet...

I spent most of the day wandering around in my boxer shorts. I went room to room, trying to find an activity that would keep me occupied. I tried to write but was unsuccessful. I watched *Smokey and the Bandit*. I tried to teach myself how to juggle.

That didn't go well either.

I don't think that I ever went more than ten minutes without having the strong urge to call Melissa. Still, I fought it.

Despite a growing need, I refused to even go to the grocery store. For dinner, I had toast with ketchup. The ketchup was from old packets I found in the back of a drawer. It was the best meal of my day.

Melissa's day wasn't really any better than mine.

She moped around in sweats. The highlight of her day was going through her old journals from when she was a teenager.

She found a checklist of all the things she was looking for in the "perfect boyfriend."

Apparently I did very well, except for not having "Luke Perry hair."

Melissa put her journals away and cried into a teddy bear for hours.

I woke up on the morning of day two, on the living room floor, with one of Melissa's dresses slung over my shoulders.

It still smelled a little like her, you know?

I spent the rest of the day eating frosting out of a can and staring at pictures of Melissa on my phone.

As the evening arrived, I found myself sitting on the couch with my phone pressed against my forehead. I tapped it against my head, harder and harder, until I finally got up the ambition. I started dialing numbers.

“Hey...”

I called Leo. And he told me that I was “a tool.”

We decided to meet up at our favorite place to shoot hoops. I was loathe to put on clothes, but I was worried that I might be going a little feral when I caught a reflection of myself in the toaster, trying to lick the jam from inside the jar.

Leo was waiting outside of the gym, eating an energy bar.

“You need a shave, Brandon.”

“Ehh.”

“Let's play some ball.”

He tossed me our official family basketball. Only games played with it count towards our running total of wins and losses. I am currently up seven hundred and sixty four to seven hundred and thirty-seven. He had the lead for years, being older and all. But my great growth spurt of the eleventh grade turned the tables. Also on our lifetime score card are six broken noses, fifty-seven stitches, and the police were called three times -- in the same month.

We walked towards our favorite little corner in the sprawling gym complex. There was a little-used basketball net. There wasn't much room for playing, which was fine for us because neither of us could really light it up from the outside. The nearby water fountain rarely worked. And, when it did, the water was hot enough to make tea. Also, the whole area smelled vaguely of eggs.

We didn't really want to know why.

During a break in our fourth game of the evening -- I was up two games to one -- I grabbed the ball and started dribbling around.

“So what do you think of my situation, big brother?”

“You can't do better than her.”

“Thanks.”

“No. Seriously. It is an impossibility. And, frankly, she is too good for you.”

“I find it hard to disagree with that.”

“And the longer you stubbornly wait before begging her to forgive you for all of your many shortcomings, the more time she has to figure out what a schmuck you are.”

“That could hurt me.”

“It absolutely will, Brandon.”

“But Catherine...”

“Mother and daughters. Daughters and mothers. It's Chinatown, dude. You can't begin to fathom the complexities of their relationship. Especially not you.”

“Leo, you are still on my side, right?”

“Well...”

“You're up ten-nine.”

“I am going to own you, bitch.”

“Bring it.”

“I'm unleashing the dogs of war this time.”

“Yeah...” I said quietly, as I lined up and drained a jump shot.

“Yeah,” Leo replied knowingly.

“So... I should call her?”

“How are you without her?”

“It absolutely tears me apart. I wander around aimlessly. I don't feel like myself. It is a crushing, soul-sucking pain and emptiness. And every minute feels worse than the last.”

“There are a lot of minutes in forever, Brandon.”

Melissa was sitting down for dinner with her parents. Catherine was making plans for her and Melissa to go for manicures and pedicures.

“Mom, some of the stuff they use, the fumes make me sick.”

"I'm sure they will crack a window. Use your internet to find out how to say 'window' in Japanese."

"They are Korean. And I am not sure that I want to--"

"Oh, Melissa, you know that your father's fiftieth birthday is coming next month. I have the perfect idea for a gift."

"Mom, he is sitting right there."

Jim looked at his wife; she didn't bother to turn her head.

"He's not paying attention. Anyway, I found the darlinest antique ivory chess set."

Jim looked up from his plate again, quite confused. Melissa shrugged at him.

"Dad hates chess."

"What? Oh, that doesn't matter. It'll look good in that abomination of a room of his. That eye-sore of a television needs something to offset it."

Melissa considered replying to that but thought better of it. "This meal is delicious."

"Thank you. I got the recipe from a woman at the club. I thought it was time that we got some good meals into you."

"I've been eating fine, Mom. Brandon has actually gotten good with the cooking."

"You had to mention him." Catherine put down her fork.

"He's my boyfriend."

"I was hoping that painful episode was behind us."

"We are having a fight."

"No wonder. He is classless."

"That isn't true, Mom."

"With his family, I am not shocked."

"They are lovely people." Melissa was getting upset.

"I know what type of man you should be dating, and it isn't Brandon."

"How can you say that?"

“Melissa... please.”

“You've never given him a chance!”

“You can do better!”

“He is amazing, Mom.”

“Oh, come on...”

“I love him!”

“You heard how he spoke to me!”

Jim dropped his fork.

Melissa and Catherine both turned.

“Would you two PLEASE stop arguing? Catherine, that boy has done nothing but love Melissa. He was there for her every step of the way during this. Day and night. Not many men could or would have done that. As for his upbringing, you grew up in a one-room apartment over a corner store in Idaho. Who do you think you are fooling? And you are complaining about how he spoke to you? I am amazed that he lasted as long as he did before blowing up. You've been on his ass since Melissa first brought him home.”

Then he turned to Melissa. “And you... What the hell are you still doing here? He loves you. You sure as shit love him. You are both being stubborn children. You've been moping around here for two days. Go home already.”

He turned back to Catherine. “And I hate this shirt. Why do you make me wear this thing?”

With Leo's words still ringing in my ear, I got out of the shower later that night, got dressed, and sat on the couch with my phone.

I hit the first number in my speed dial.

“Man, you are stubborn.” Melissa's words felt like hugs for my ears. Or something less weird sounding.

“I don't know how you put up with me,” I replied through a smile so big that it actually caused pain.

“It's a struggle.”

“Sweetie, please come home.”

“Awww. My dad is going to drive me into the city tomorrow.”

“And you are coming home?”

“I'm coming home.”

I did my happy dance, with a little of my relieved dance worked in.

“Brandon, are you dancing?”

“Um... no?” I stopped dancing and looked around.

“Are you excited that you are going to see me tomorrow?” she asked, winking to her father as they pulled up in front of our apartment building.

“So excited, Mel! I really miss you.”

She kissed her father -- who was wearing a Magnum PI-style Hawaiian shirt -- and got out of the car.

“I miss you too.”

I danced a little more.

I looked around the apartment, trying to gauge how long it would take me to clean it.

“Mel... I'm sorry. About all of it.”

“I know. Don't worry.”

“But you needed me to be better, you know?”

“You've been amazing from the start, Brandon.”

“I shouldn't have said those things to your mother.”

“She has been torturing you every day for months. It was bound to come out.”

“I should have been able to last longer.”

“Brandon, it's fine. Honest.”

We were interrupted by a knock at the door. “Hang on, Mel.”

I opened the door and she was standing there.

I dropped my phone and immediately gave her the longest, hardest movie kiss.

The last week of Melissa's chemo treatments went well. I am not sure she would exactly characterize it that way but, compared to the beginning, things were going a lot more smoothly.

We were getting along well too. Very well.

She was handling the treatments better.

Her mother was even behaving. So, when Catherine planned a small dinner at the apartment for the end of Melissa's treatments, I barely even flinched.

I did, however, stay out of the way.

Friday night arrived, and the party had grown a little. Leo showed up. Gina was there. And everyone else from Melissa's office attended too.

Melissa was excited to see everyone. And she was incredibly relieved to be finished her treatment, if a little leery of celebrating too much for fear of tempting fate.

The party was, by all accounts, a success. Good food was eaten by happy people. I was even on board with Leo's wife making a late appearance. Oh, hell, her name is Jasmine.

I mixed her a drink when she arrived.

"Thank you," Jasmine said, sniffing the drink.

"Gin and tonic. That's what you drink, right?" I asked.

"Yes." She was eyeing it closely.

"I'm not trying to poison you."

"Okay..."

Melissa smiled a lot that night. So, in turn, I smiled a lot.

The gleam was back in her eyes. And, as always, people were flocking to her. She laughed easily.

I mean, I knew that the rough part of our journey might not have been over. But, for that moment, on that flat, straight stretch of highway, I was putting the top down and listening to Buffalo Springfield's "Mr. Soul" next to the love of my life.

As the night was winding down, Catherine began clinking her dessert fork on her wine glass. I was having too good of a time to even roll my eyes. I stood next to Melissa.

"Excuse me." Because people hadn't ended their conversation quite quickly enough, she spoke louder.

“EXCUSE me. Hello. First, I would like to thank you all for coming tonight. Jim and I really appreciate everyone helping us celebrate the strength and determination of our daughter. Melissa, we are so proud of you. Everyone, please raise a glass.” We all did. “To Melissa.”

“To Melissa”s filled the room. Then the clinking. And Melissa blushed. I kissed her softly on the lips.

“One more thing,” Catherine continued. “With Melissa living in the city, Jim and I couldn't spend as much time with Melissa as we would have liked to. But we were able to sleep a little better at night knowing that Brandon was with her. From the moment she was diagnosed, through surgery, through treatment, he was there for every minute of it. And I didn't make it easy on him. Friends, to Brandon.”

I was in shock. Glasses clinked. Melissa rubbed my back.

And Catherine looked straight at me and mouthed, “Thank you.”

I was in the shower.

I was in there for a while. Water pouring all over me.

And tears running down my face.

I hadn't cried since I was ten years old. But, that night, I couldn't hold it back.

I was sitting on the floor of the shower, bawling my eyes out.

I barely knew how to process what I was feeling. So I didn't try.

I sat there until the tears stopped. Only then did I get out, dry off and get dressed.

I checked my dried and dressed self in the mirror.

No traces.

“Brandon...?” Melissa called from the bedroom, as she heard me open the bathroom door.

“Hi.” I sat on the foot of the bed. She looked so adorable. She was all cuddled up and had been reading.

“Is there any ice cream left from the party?”

“Sorry. Gina scarfed the last of it.”

“Oh...”

“Would you like me to go to the store for you?”

“No. I would *never...*” she said, almost keeping a straight face.

“I don't mind. At all.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

She leaned forward and gave me the warmest kiss. I melted. Every time.

“Cookies and cream?” She batted her eye lashes.

“You got it, sweetie.”

She bundled the covers back up and grabbed her book. She looked at me for a few moments.

“Thank you, Brandon.”

All I could do was smile.

I grabbed my wallet and walked out of the room, looking over my shoulder so that my eyes got to spend every possible moment on her.

We found ourselves in one of those doctors' offices. You know -- the ones that are set up to be soothing. Piped in elevator music. Soft lighting. Plants. Weird fountain thing in the corner that just makes you want to pee. Constantly. Yes, it is supposed to be soothing.

A year had passed since our first visit here.

We sat in the waiting room.

“If you mention your ovaries, I am going to shank you with this pen,” Melissa muttered, as she filled out her forms.

“Me? I would never.”

A familiar old man, came out of an examining room. It was my Mötley Crüe partner in crime.

He gave me a wink as he walked by, looking as spry as could be. I smiled and gave a nod of acknowledgment.

The nurse came over. “The Doctor will see you now.”

Melissa looked at me. I kissed her on the forehead.

We walked in. Hand in hand.

We took our seats. Melissa put her head on my shoulder.

“Think he has any lollipops I could steal?” I wondered aloud.

“Behave, you.”

Dr. Chase entered suddenly. He had a few more gray hairs. He still walked with a definite sense of purpose. He sat at his desk and looked at the file he had been carrying. He looked up at us and then back down at the folder. Then he closed it again and looked directly at Melissa.

And he smiled.

“Yeah?” she whispered.

“Yeah,” he said with an even bigger smile.

She squeezed my hand with excitement. She squeezed it hard.

Granted, it probably wouldn't have hurt so much if it wasn't for those pesky diamonds on her engagement ring digging into my fingers.