

Half-Empty

Even he didn't know why he said it. He was only partially aware that his voice kept repeating the same thing to her in a slow, drunken drawl: "You never do anything spontaneously."

She stared at him as he sat there slumped in the sofa with a beer in hand, and she tried to remember the last time he'd left the apartment.

What am I supposed to do? she wondered. But she didn't ask because she didn't think it was important.

After the sixth time he said it, she'd had enough. She stood up, picked up her jacket, jerked her arms through the sleeves – missing one entirely – and tried to walk out of the room as if she'd meant to wear her jacket that way.

He stared after her and wondered what he'd said wrong. He was never able to tell when he was going to offend her. After a while, he'd stopped worrying about it because it seemed like she got offended no matter what he did. Every other time he said something, he ended up looking at the door just as it closed, an echo of the slam still resounding in his ears. And every time he'd think to himself, What'd I do?

She was never there to respond, to tell him what he was doing to hurt her. She just left. On one occasion, she'd left for an entire week, never stopping to call to let him know she was

still alive. She'd thought her absence might make him appreciate her more, but it never seemed to change anything.

This time, she decided it was finally time to leave for good. All of her belongings could stay with him in that dumpy apartment for all she cared. She was beyond care, beyond worry, beyond anything resembling the love they thought they once had, and she'd fallen headfirst into a stagnant pool of immoderate discontent.

As the door closed behind her this time, he stared at it thinking, What'd I do? He thought to yell after her to tell her to be careful, but then he figured it wouldn't support his argument. Besides, she was probably too far away to hear him. Then he wondered why he suddenly had a nauseous feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was like he somehow knew he'd never see her again. He didn't believe in premonitions, but it was impossible to ignore the way the thought hung in his mind: She's gone for good.

The most troubling aspect of thinking he'd never see her again was that he couldn't decide if it was a good thing or a bad thing. He looked around the apartment, glanced at the pictures of the two of them smiling on the beach or climbing Mount Washington two years ago, and he missed her for a moment. Once the moment passed, he looked into his can of Schlitz, tried to see the last few sips, finally gave up and drained the can. He threw the can to the floor where it hit with a clatter before rolling a few feet and coming to rest against the leg of the TV stand.

She heard a clatter in the backseat of his Toyota as she swerved in and out of the light traffic en route to Massachusetts. As she sped past the cars around her, she turned on the radio and tried to find something soothing to listen to, but there were storms in the area and reception was terrible. She didn't really care, though, because none of the stations were interesting

anyway. The music flowed like flat soda: devoid of the sparkling essence that was supposed to give it meaning. The hollow music fell flat against her ears as her mind raced along with the disappearing highway behind her.

I'll teach him, she thought. I'll show him that I'm not afraid to be spontaneous.

She started to wonder where she was going, but as soon as the thought entered her mind, she forced it behind her frustration. She knew enough people in Boston that she could easily find somewhere to go. Someone would surely take her in for the night, listen to her story, applaud her for getting out of that dreadful relationship. After all, she'd been the only one who didn't think he was wrong for her. Why had she stuck up for him all these years? Why had she spent so many nights awake in bed wondering why she was still with him? Why had she been so scared to leave? Now that she'd left, she found it strange that it had taken her so long to realize the futility of fighting to make something meaningful out of their relationship.

Static filled her ears.

Static flooded the screen, but he barely noticed. His limp arm hung over the edge of the sofa, the dog halfheartedly nudging a slippery nose against his hand. He felt a numb burning in the back of his neck as his head rested forward on his chest. His eyes stared into space, interpreting the new silence in the apartment. He'd never experienced this kind of silence. This was the kind of silence that appeared in the midst of noise, a silence erupting from within and suffocating any attempt to put two thoughts together. Everything was disconnected. He half-wondered where she'd go, why she'd left, who she was. He half-worried that his strange premonition was a new talent he'd discovered without ever wanting it. He half-cursed the television for bringing him nothing but black and white chaos.

But it was all the same: everything and nothing at once, clarity and confusion in conflicted combination.

As she crossed the border into Massachusetts, she half-thought she was going too fast and she'd get pulled over at any minute. But I'm just doing what he wanted, she thought. I'm just doing without thinking, jumping headfirst into whatever calamity awaits. Maybe I'll drive across the grass divider and see how far I can go into oncoming traffic before I get hit by a semi. But she kept going, speeding away twenty or thirty miles an hour above the speed limit on her way to Boston because he'd said she wasn't spontaneous enough.

She knew she wasn't crazy enough to drive into oncoming traffic, and somehow the knowledge of that made her even angrier. She'd given up on listening for something through the static on the radio, so it wasn't long before she heard the siren behind her.

Damnit. Not again.

The doorbell felled the barricade of his half-thoughts, and he arose swaying slightly and smacking his good hand against the arm that had fallen asleep from hanging over the edge of the sofa.

"I'm coming, damnit," he mumbled, stumbling on the beer cans that crowded the floor.

He prepared himself to deride her for running away from her problems. But when he opened the door, a strange face greeted him. The face was young and eager, smiling up at him, and all he could think was, Damn, kid, you don't know what you're in for.

"Here you go, sir!"

"What's this?" he demanded as the smiling face shoved a brown package through the doorway.

She slowed down to the speed limit without ever stepping on the brakes because she didn't want to attract attention to the fact that she knew she was speeding. A strange scraping in her stomach made her think there were tiny men inside her, battling over opposing theories on the way she led her life.

She should've stayed. No she shouldn't have.

She listened passively to the voices as she awaited the turn signal that would let her know to pull over.

She watched as the cruiser breezed past her like she was a blade of the grass between north and south. All she could think was, Thank God. But once she realized that she wouldn't be pulled over, she was angry with herself all over again.

He's right, she thought. I'll never be spontaneous. Leaving him is the most spontaneous thing I've ever done. All these years, I've been sitting quietly, listening to him talk about random bullshit while I stared at the wall trying to figure out what life is all about.

What *is* life all about?

"You have to sign for it," the kid said.

"Who's it from?"

"Uh . . . a Mr. Yankey."

"I don't know a Mr. Yankey."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. For all I know he doesn't even exist. I'm not gonna sign. I didn't ask for this."

The kid stood in the hallway wondering what he was going to do with the package. He looked down at the brown paper and the black marker address scribbled on the top: Mr. James

Johnson. 48 Maple Avenue, Apartment 102. He looked up at the door that had just been slammed before him: 102.

What was the problem?

She'd made her way off the interstate onto Storrow Drive into Kenmore Square. She squinted at the lights as they pierced red into her bloodshot eyes.

Why am I crying? she thought. I'm better off without him.

He picked up a stray beer can, crushed it between his palms, and tossed it toward the trashcan. It missed and landed right back on the floor. He thought, Well, at least it's not taking up as much room now.

He walked to the refrigerator without feeling his feet touch the ground. He grasped the handle, opened the door, looked at the half-empty case of Schlitz, and decided that beer just wasn't going to do it.

He couldn't figure out why he felt so empty.

She couldn't figure out where the hell to go.

The kid thought, People never refuse to sign. What am I supposed to do with the package? I guess I'll just finish my route and figure it out later. He took the package back to the truck, put it on the seat next to him, and looked at it one more time before driving off to finish his route.

The light turned green as she sat contemplating which direction to take. Horns started honking behind her, and she realized she'd have to move without thinking about it. She turned onto Brookline Avenue, noticed a parking place, and pulled into it. A light drizzle began to fall on the windshield.

Shit, he thought. It's raining. Maybe I should go look for her.

Shit, she thought. It's raining. Maybe I'll go into that bar.

Fuck it. She'll find her way back by herself if she wants to come back.

The alcohol had deadened him to the world, but the static still scraped across his spine. He turned off the TV. He looked around the apartment and took stock of the emptiness. What can I fill it with? What do I need?

"What do you want?"

"Long Island."

"I.D.?"

She fumbled through her purse and let a smile tug at her lips and fight back the tears as she handed him the I.D. He's gotta know I'm not that young. But it always felt good to have someone ask.

"Thanks," the bartender said. "You look a little tired. Rough day?"

"You have no idea."

He stumbled to the hallway closet and started rummaging through their supply of first aid and sickness remedies. He pushed aside bottles and bottles of ibuprofen, acetaminophen, headache deadeners, stomach pacifiers, open wound coverings. He came across a bottle of cough syrup and tilted his heavy head to the side as he looked at it. His hand wrapped around the bottle and he stood halfway in the closet for several minutes wondering what he was doing with his hand on the bottle.

"You wanna talk about it?"

"I'd rather not," she said.

"Honey, when you look like you've had as rough a day as it looks like you've had, you'd really be better off talking about it."

“What are you, my therapist?”

“I’m a bartender. That’s part of my job.”

“Well, not this time.”

He finally pulled the bottle from the closet, thinking, The alcohol’s just not doing it.

What a strange name, the kid thought. Mr. Yankey. I wonder if anyone would notice if I kept the package?

“Are you sure you don’t want to talk about it?”

“Yeah.”

“Oh, come on, look at me. Gimme a smile.”

“Trust me, there’s no reason to smile.”

The glossy green liquid slid down the back of his throat. For a second, he thought he was going to puke. But it stayed down. He took several swigs right out of the bottle, then read the label.

The kid started to scratch at the brown paper but found that packaging tape had sealed every possible opening. There was no way in. He searched the delivery truck for a sharp object.

She stared into the tall glass and thought the color of the drink didn’t look quite right. Whatever, she thought, It’s still alcohol. She shivered as goosebumps covered her arms. She still felt damp from the drizzle outside. As she wrapped her fingers around the glass, she thought the coldness was the perfect complement to the brisk October rain and the loneliness in her heart. This is right. This is good. I’ll just drink it all away. Then I’ll decide where to sleep tonight.

His head suddenly jerked to the side with a painful bolt that sliced from ear to ear. What the fuck was that? he thought. Maybe I should sit down.

He treaded through the sea of beer cans, wondering why the sofa seemed so far away. His hands opened and closed around the air in his fists. Why can't I grab the air? Why can't I feel my hands? Why does everything look black around the edges like I'm seeing it through a tunnel?

"You want another one?"

"Sure."

"You usually drink this much?"

"I don't know."

"Are you driving?"

"Yeah."

"If you're driving, I can't give you any more."

"Just one more, okay? It really has been a rough day."

"This is your last one, then you're cut off, alright?"

"Fine."

"I don't want you hurting yourself, honey."

In the compartment under the truck's cigarette lighter, the kid found a pair of fingernail clippers. That'll do, he thought.

Maybe I should just lie down, he thought. He couldn't feel his limbs. He couldn't feel his thoughts. He couldn't feel anything. Let her go, he thought. I don't fucking care if she *is* gone for good. I don't need her.

He made it to the end of the tunnel and laid down on the sofa in the dark. The blackness spun from the edges to the center of his field of vision, and he thought, I'm going to sleep now.

The kid snipped a corner off one of the taped ends of the package and then realized it wouldn't do any good to cut through a part that was surrounded by tape. He fumbled with the fingernail clippers and finally managed to clip a hole where he could slide his finger in and rip the paper away from the box.

“So, you're not gonna give me any more, huh?”

“Nope. You're on your own now, hun.”

“Great.”

“You be careful.”

She tossed a few bills on the counter and slurped the last of her Long Island through the straw. She tilted the glass so she was sure to get the very last drops, then looked all the way to the bottom.

Empty. Great.

Getting up from her bar stool, she looked at the bartender one final time and said, “You sure I can't have just one more?”

“Not tonight, hun.”

She grabbed her purse and turned away as he called after her to tell her again to be careful. She thought, Why is he so concerned? He doesn't even know me. It must be nice to have someone who cares about you like that.

He gasped for air as he awoke. Struggling for breath, he parted the air with his hands, trying to sweep aside the curtains of despair that clouded his mind.

What the hell is wrong with me?

He tried to stand, thinking he needed to move or the lack of movement would settle permanently into his limbs. I've paralyzed myself, he thought. What the hell was I thinking?

Why can't she just come back?

Why can't I just decide where to go? she thought. I'm not even sure I want to spend the night somewhere warm and comfortable. I feel more like I want to stay outside in the elements. Maybe it would be nice to see what it feels like to be homeless. Maybe it would teach me something about myself. Maybe I'd learn what it's like to be truly alone. Maybe I'd be starved for human companionship after just one night. Maybe I'd go back to him. Maybe I'd discover whatever it is I'm missing in my life.

Maybe I wouldn't feel any different.

She got back in her car and watched the rain fall on the windshield for a few minutes. The drizzle had grown into a full-fledged storm with thunder and lightning and blurred figures in the roads. The lights glowed red, yellow, and green, mixed with the water on the windshield and the water on the streets and made everything look like it was bleeding rainbows. The rain melted everything together, found a common bond with everything, made it so that everything different was somehow the same.

I can't breathe, he thought. I can't breathe.

He scratched at the air and grabbed at his throat. He ran across the room and flung himself against the door just to see if he could feel it. He punched his fist into the solid oak and banged his head against it. He saw blood on the door as he peeled himself away, but he didn't know if it came from his head or his hand. He couldn't feel anything. Nothing hurt, except for the emptiness.

I fucked up this time, he thought. Where the hell is she?

She started the car and pulled into an alleyway behind a row of apartment buildings far too expensive for her to ever dream about living in. I do everything I can with my life, she

thought. Why can these people afford luxury apartments, when I'm stuck living in a shitty apartment with an alcoholic in the boondocks in New Hampshire?

But I'm not stuck anymore. I'm out. I made it. I got away. Now all I have to do is make something of myself. But what?

Don't think about it.

She looked down the alleyway before her and saw that it came to a dead end. She focused on the concrete wall at the end, then floored the gas, checked to make sure her seatbelt was on, and drove straight for the wall.

Why did I check for the seatbelt? she thought. That's not spontaneous.

This is what she does to me, he thought. All I did was make a simple suggestion, and she took it so seriously that she left. I have nothing without her. He picked up the phone and dialed 911.

"I need help," he said to the ringing. "I need help."

"I need help," she gurgled through the blood in her mouth. "I need help."

The crash had drawn a crowd into the alleyway. The rain had lightened to a drizzle again as the bartender stepped into the night and looked at the mangled car.

This is light, the kid thought. No wonder he didn't want to accept it. It feels like there's nothing in it.

When he woke up, he felt the floor moving. Or maybe it wasn't the floor. There was a dull ringing in his ears, in the distance of a receding tunnel. His eyelids felt heavy as he tried to open them. He kept sliding back into darkness. Voices around his head made him wonder if she'd come home to him.

"Honey? Is that you?"

Blankets of blackness tugged at his eyelids as he tried to force himself to see straight. The dim lights were too bright, the far-away noises too loud, the heaviness in his head filling up the emptiness with a feeling of drugged revulsion.

I wonder which one's better.

She opened her eyes and stared at the rain dripping down the windshield at an ever-slackening pace. Everything seemed to be getting slower. The dripping made her feel the alcohol again, the cold remedy as it had run down the back of her throat. She remembered the sound of a man's voice telling her to be careful, but she didn't know whose voice it was. She didn't care. Parts of her vision were blurred with blood. She understood, but she didn't acknowledge it as good or bad. It didn't matter; it was all the same – all the same black and white, all the same flesh and blood with the permanent imminence of death.

The bartender saw her head tilting awkwardly to the side, blood dripping down her forehead and into her eyes. Metal was crunched around her like a snug, woolen blanket keeping her safe from the world's harms. He stood there as the crowd grew by twos and threes, everyone poking their heads closer to the wreck, trying to look nonchalant, not wanting anyone to think they're strange for taking a closer look at the carnage. Then he called out, "Has anyone called an ambulance?"

Silence.

Dull poking, limp movement.

Did they put me on drugs? he wondered. Didn't I have enough of those? What are they doing? Who are these people? Where is she?

The kid pulled the paper off, tossed it to the floor of the truck, and looked at the plain black box inside. He held it up to his ear and shook it.

Silence.

He picked up the discarded paper and looked at it one more time: Mr. James Johnson. 48 Maple Avenue, Apartment 102. He looked at the return address. He looked back at the box, shrugged, mumbled, “Strange,” and opened the box to look inside.

The ambulance arrived at the hospital and again he felt the floor moving beneath him, differently this time, bumpier. He heard wheels turning, his stomach churning, a subtle burning between his ears.

Where is she?

She saw a pair of distant eyes looking at her with a familiar concern.

Jim?

“Hello? Hey, it’s the bartender. Remember me?”

Jim?

“Can you look at me?”

Her eyes focused on the blurred windshield, the concrete wall too close to her face. Why didn’t the windshield break? she wondered. I must be losing my mind. Am I dead? Maybe I’m dead. I must be dead. No, I feel something. What do I feel? What is that?

What is this? the kid thought. He reached inside and moved his hand around to feel for something substantial. He turned the box upside-down and let the contents fall to the floor. He stared at the spattering of white foam nuggets on the ground, then looked back into the box.

It was nothing but packing materials, he thought. What’s the point in that?