

## -SYLVIA-

Every day for a week after he dumped me is the same. I am totally calling this a dump. Were we going out? Did he break my heart? Do I hate him? Can't I stop loving him? I miss him more with every passing moment.

The first time I saw Arthur was the feeling of understanding what fate is. All that time I spent breaking into boys locker rooms all the sneaking I've worked so hard on. It all came full circle when I went into his house. Then we went out, played racquetball with each other. That was the feeling of knowing someone my whole life long, who I only just met. That was so real.

He left me, and who did he leave me for?

Loopy. Fuck Loopy.

I remember shrugging him off when he tried to give me his damn pity. I could have killed him. He stole my camera, then he stole my man.

I cleaned up what mom needed cleaning, and went to my room, and broke down. She was bitching about something from the living room and I didn't even acknowledge her. I bunched my face into the pillow and cried like the little girl I am. It felt like hours. I had one simple thing, and that was all I needed. Just Arthur Delobb, and that's it. That is not too much, and he knows my heart, but he's the one who said no.

"I'm too fucking short. No one will ever love me."

My anger at him fills me with my longing for him. It's not long before I've slid my hand down under the elastic band of my panties.

My night goes by without much sleep. Just pleasure and sadness.

I didn't take notes in any of my classes. I actually don't care anymore. When I crawled through the air duct to the locker rooms, there was no thrill. I was just going through the motions. Pick the lock, crawl through the building, same as always. Take out my camera and click, click, click. Lori had met up with me earlier, and said I should see a movie. I didn't have Kennel work that night, so what the hell?

She asked me why I was down and I told her it was because some guy dumped me.

"I didn't know you had a boyfriend."

As soon as she said that, I knew I didn't want to talk about it. "Well I did, and he dumped me, so let's drop it" I said. We saw a Ben Stiller romantic comedy. I hated every single second of it, but I tried to look happy. Lori meant well, show me that being in love can be good and fun

but it just made me hate how I was about it.

I went home, loaded more of the pictures on to my PC, and went to bed.

The weekend went by with me taking care of mom, getting some groceries, and going to work. Saturday and Sunday, he doesn't call.

Next day was more of the same, I put some effort back into doing school work that time, then I went off to scoop the shit and clean the cages. My boss, Nina Fillmore who owns more cats than we keep at the kennel at any moment, she asks me what's wrong. I can't shake the look of dumped and miserable to anyone.

I got out of work, went home to do the last of my homework and went to sleep. The next morning I went back to school again. It was in math class, during another lesson on polynomials that for the first time a new option appeared to me.

I could kill myself.

What scared me even then was how matter-of-fact it was. I could go on like this, but I don't have to. It's pretty simple.

Arthur was using me to get with Loopy. Arthur with his dusty brown gentle hair cut just right so that it slants toward his right eye, which has just the slightest touch of green, compared to his left, but they're both a beautiful blue shade. He made me laugh, and he listened to what I had to say. He invited me on what could have been a great Halloween party, and he wore that sexy Dracula outfit. Why? For who? For what? It was all so he could get Loopy. Dave. Fucking dammit.

His smile was brilliant white but not gaudy or fake looking. His voice was gentle like a spring breeze, or it could roll like crashing waves. His body built so strong, and his personality so fragile.

I'd do anything for him.

I'd give anything to him.

He is perfect.

I'm going to kill myself.

Day in and day out goes by with me just wondering how much more I'll take before I finally go through with it. I'd been avoiding Lori for some time since the movie, blaming it on school work. I was standing at my locker getting stuff for my next class. She came up from behind me and gave me a hug.

“What are you doing?” I asked her emptily.

“I just thought you needed a hug.”

I remember not feeling happy or sad. I just had a feeling that I didn't want her to stop. I just wanted this in a peaceful and quiet moment.

It seemed to start at my belly and then spread to my head, making me dizzy and weak. That was when my knees bent down, and I was kneeling on the floor. She stayed there with me even after the bell rang.

When I cried it wasn't sobbing. I'd done enough of that. It was just a tightness in my throat that made it almost impossible to talk.

“I have so much I have to do, and no one to share my life with. I don't want to live any more, Lori.” My throat really tightened up

“But I don't want to die.”

“It's okay.”

“What should I do?” I asked her.

“Everything's going to be all right.”

## -DAVE-

It's just so right.

I love this wonderful world of carjacking.

Lexus was the first I traded it in to the choppers. Then Saturday Arthur took me out and taught me how to drive a stick shift. I had it down after a few hours. The day after that, the next fucking day only an hour out of church I stole a corvette. It was a pickpocket job. She pulled into the parking lot, and I watched her drive by, and where she parked. As she passed to go inside the mall I reached down into her deep fur coat pocket, and pulled out the keys.

I wasn't ready for the rumble. There's a big fucker of an engine in those things. I delivered the car to the chop shop and it all came out as money.

I went after the 'vette just to show off. The next day I got practical; Honda accord. I stole a girls purse, and the keys were inside. After this I walked up and down streets in the area for an hour and a half, pushing the little keyless remote button until one of the cars finally beeped at me.

I brought that the choppers and the guy told me he would never ask questions, but he would say that he won't take a car everyday. Wherever I was getting the cars from, I just needed to slow down. I asked him if he knew where I can get some old license plates. He told me to come back the next day.

The rest of the day I stole my usual stuff. Computers, and MP3 players and jewelry. Thirsting to get behind the wheel again. Next day I return and he had a box full of old plates; sweet.

I don't hot wire cars. Not my style. It's more fun to steal the keys. I get them from women. It's not sexist, it's just easier. They're generally slower, generally weaker, generally easier. I know what's in your purse. I'm stealing your purse. I'm stealing your car.

The real tough part is keeping a plate change on hand. I keep 'em in my backpack. They're not heavy, and I only carry two at a time. Just I don't want any cop reading a stolen plate, so I take a turn to the nearest alley, ditch the old plates, and attach new ones. If a cop hears about a stolen car, matching what I'm driving but he doesn't see the matching plates, I've got a bit better chance he doesn't check. If he does, I'm screwed either way.

The money's good So I'm committed to getting three cars a week. I've been keeping in touch with Arthur on and off, trying to get an inside track on some of his money,

or if maybe he'd like to buy a car. He's not dumb. I know he's not. I just can't help myself. I even offer to pitch in for a slice, but he won't hear of it. I don't know what's next, but I want to get payed.

Friday I'm cruising in a Monte Carlo. In my rear view on the interstate, here comes the fuzz. He pulls into the next lane, and I'm holding my breath. I don't have long enough to wonder my chances and he goes right by me.

“Sucker.” I scream as I turn up the stereo. “You dumbass.”

A couple grand with each car, it's like candy. Later that day I went to hot nytes and spent a lot of cash. It was big money Friday when the drug dealers get in the door, and all the prices are jacked up so they can spend as much of it as possible and have it laundered back to them later. I walked and talked like a big shot, and even bought Raven a few drinks. She was giving me the eye all night. Asked Jess what she thought of her.

“Hey,” She said “Knock yourself out.”

So Raven took me back to her place. She's got that aroma of a black woman through her hair and on every inch of her. Her real name is Melissa and she's off the hook. Turned the lights down low, and cued up some Zapp and Roger, and all I can remember is her dark curvy figure lined against neon shining in through her apartment window. We make the cold autumn night unbearably hot. The smell of her touched with a hint of lily perfume filled my nostrils as we lifted and rolled and pressed our sweaty selves together. For me, just then I felt like a big shot. I'd shown up the city, the cops, the dealers, and Arthur, and I was hot shit. Top of the small time cons.

Then you wake up Saturday, hungover and naked in a strange room. I picked out a cigarette from her bedside table. She'd already showered and was dressed.

“I'm gonna have a smoke, OK?”

“Oh, that's fine. I got to get going soon, baby. Can I trust you to let yourself out?”

I could steal her shoes, TV and stereo.

“No you can't.”

I light up my cigarette and put on my pants pretty fast. Then I button up my shirt on me.

“You want to go to church this Sunday?”

“Sorry, baby, tonight I'm heading out of town for a week. Got to see a friend of mine in San Diego.”

No matter where I am or what I do, I am a servant of the living God. My duty is ministry. His will be done.

I settled in at my place for a quiet sabbath Saturday of reading psalms and playing video games.

Sunday I go to church.

Sylvia is still here. She sits on the other side of the aisle. I pay attention to her faking her way through the hymns, and sighing and bowing her head. Oh, please. Like she's got any clue as to what she's doing. Hypocrite. Pathetic.

She never looks at me. When I went to church with her before she seemed like she was just going through motions. She looks the same way now. No comprehension of greater truth, no reconciliation, no awe or humility, just sing the hymns, shut up, listen and leave. She looked like those who treat worship as a chore or a routine. It reminded me of something else as well. Christ's words to the church of Laodicea as revealed by John in the book of Revelations:

*“I know your deeds that you are neither cold nor hot! I wish you were either one or the other! So because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth.”*

This is the kind of Christianity I dislike the most. I'll be damned if I have the blame from bringing forward to God another lukewarm Christian into the fold.

After church lets out I approach her and stopped her walking away.

“What are you doing?”

She didn't even acknowledge me.

“Sylvia.”

“I'm just going to church, Loopy.”

“Arthur and I told you to stay out of our affairs.”

“I've been doing that, OK? I've got both your cell-phones on hand, but I haven't called either of you. I've wanted to talk to him especially, but even you at times just

so I could get a good word in. I never did. I didn't come up to talk to you, you bothered me.”

“Yeah, but why here? Why my church?”

“You invited me, jerk. I can't go to church?”

“Sylvia do you even believe in God?”

“I don't know. Does God believe in me? I'm trying Dave, I really am. I'm lost and confused and I've got a lot of stuff to do. School, my mom, my job, Bills, groceries, the newspaper, photography. I don't even know how I do it all. Out in the middle of all that stuff I met a man named Arthur Delobb and fell in love. Then I lost him and now...I...I don't know. I don't have any answers. So maybe I thought I'd look to God. Ok? That might be the stupidest thing I've ever said, but I don't have anything else to help right now. If you want me to I'll go to another church.”

Well, she's got me now. I have been empowered to join the Lords church. I have my own choice to stay or leave it. Outside myself I have no power to turn away anyone – ANYONE – Who seeks the love of God and comes forward to believe.

## -ARTHUR-

There is no God.

Patterns and chaos and causality and chance: The four mighty pillars that hold aloft this vast ceiling of real. From Tyranny comes conquest, from deception comes profit, from luck comes survival but from consistence comes reason. In the air I breathe and the water I drink is all the authority and power to claim my will as my right.

That's why I decided to take over my Fathers business.

My father is among the most shrewd, decisive, and fortunate men that have ever walked this earth. The most merciless businessman I ever met. He insured the roof of a factory and when it started leaking a report came out that went straight to his office. Dad gave explicit instructions to follow procedure back to the claims department. This means that claims department went in to the owner of the factory and agreed to pay for the patching of the roof. Just a patch. It would be quicker than extensive maintenance and would not hold up production. The owner took the deal. This leak was caused by a badly corroded, and poorly constructed segment of the roof superstructure. The leak stopped and seven months later in the middle of an August night that part of the roof caved in.

There was no way dad could not have known about the cause of the problem. Zero. He knew about the defective construction, but didn't say a thing.

The owner was furious, and immediately filed a claim. With a total straight face, the company had to tell him that we were not responsible for the superstructure, and that we had fulfilled the repair requirements to the roof which we insured. We'd done our job. Take it up with the designer, and contractor.

Our whole company and dad in particular went to bed every night knowing that a loose piece of steel was hanging over people's heads on a factory floor. After the incident the company got no compensation, no help from the contractor, nothing. They went under.

One less cotton mill.

This is my competition.

A wise man once said "If the student fails to surpass the teacher, they have failed."

When something is going to go terribly wrong, my father usually has the good sense to stay on the legal side of terribly wrong. Guilty but without culpability. A decade ago I concluded to be just that. Do what I had to do, and not get caught. Ten grand. Thirty. I may take a

piece of Ken's chop shop cars. He's got such a kid in a candy store attitude about being a carjacker. It seems like he has a sadistic playful innocence most of us outgrow, like killing ants with a magnifying glass. I've got my own hustle to maintain.

Insider trading, fomenting, short selling. It's like spreading a pat of butter on hot bread. It's only solid so long, and if you spread it well enough it all seeps into the nooks and crannies of the bread, and there is no getting it out. That's the money. That's the greed. The hustle never stops. Still, I sometimes long to do something with the money. I'm a self made Millionaire, and I'm just sitting on it. There's never enough money, and there's never a good time to put the unmonitored, overseas doomsday fund to good use.

I could retire off the interest, but I'm spoiled rotten and set in my decisions, and as a rich brat I needed to get my way. I felt the need for a moment of opportunity. I've also heard rumors that a hard time is on the way. I wish I'd only heard it from one source, but with the foreclosure wave that hit this past spring and summer, there is something very dark looming on the horizon. All my contacts are wary, and wondering where the money will be safe in another two years. The message that I've been reading is 'If not now, then never;' that I need a moment to strike. This Thursday I got it.

I got a call from dad to do an appraisal on some goods for the crazy old rich man, Marvin Curosa. Today he's made a claim on an object that we have to appraise in order to decide on coverage. It was a bright and unusually warm November day. I got out of the car in my long, gray trench coat and scarf holding the paperwork I have to get filled out when I get back. Mr. Curosa was there along with the man he hired to appraise the goods. We were on the back lot of the warehouse where he keeps his goods. The blacktop was cracked and broken, and the warehouse blocks seemed dull, aluminum-sided coffins stuck up out of the industrial park. The appraiser, Mr. Ryan, a heavy-set bespectacled black man who looks absolutely stuffed inside his suit stood waiting for me to join them so they could get underway. His neck and belly bulged against his tie and belt respectively.

Mr. Curosa looked at both of us for a short bit, sternly. He looks even older than what he sounded on the phone. His hair is thin, past gray and going into white. His skin is crusted and wrinkled, and his eyes seem dim behind thick bifocals.

"I never trust anyone I haven't worked with before, so know right off the bat that I don't trust either of you. Expect that I will be fact checking, that I will know what you're about to tell me before you even say it. No flattery, no bullshit. I want the truth. Don't tell me what I want to hear."

"You're an angry loud-mouthed old fart, aren't you?" I said

"What was that?"

I was a little manic that day. I should have warned him.

"I won't tell you what you want to hear."

"I don't need your snot, you little bastard." he gets right up in my face. "You don't look a thing like the old man, you know that?"

"I take after my mother."

"What ever happened to her?"

"A little cocaine, and a lot of crazy. She caught the bad end of a pre-nup, and I haven't seen her since I was three. But you're my dad's old buddy, you knew that already, don't you?"

Number one thing I hate talking about: My manic depression. Number two: my family. Both seem splintered and out of control.

"Just sort your shit." The old man said. He turned and took out the key to the warehouse gate. I saw that it was attached to a bigger key-chain. The key he put in the slot had an ugly orange-rubber end on it. I got a good look at it, just as he opened the storage unit.

It felt like an old 1930's serial or an Indiana Jones movie. The warehouse opened and light poured in. Glimmering before me were all the treasures of the orient.

There were Victorian vanities, and tables and chairs. They were Chinese and very old. He had an old rifle collection that looked to go back to the civil war, perhaps even the French-Indian war. I saw medieval woodcarvings of deer and hunters in the forests of Germania. In the back were paintings stacked up on each other, along with marble and terracotta statues. It was not a warehouse. It was a museum. Curosa walked up to a collection of rugs wrapped up in clear plastic bags, and set on holders.

"Why the bags?" I asked him.

"They're silk and very old. I have to protect them."

"Persian rugs?"

"And Indian. Not just rugs, either."

"Do we insure this collection?"

"Of course you do. Your father's a good man."

This collection had to be worth millions. 'millions' I was thinking to myself. All of it inured by us.

He had old communion dishes of fine gold, Swords from several different nations, and times, African tribal artifacts, old books musty with age.

"Sir," I said flabbergasted "What is it you are trying to appraise?"

"Just a second, son. It's over here." The old man pulled aside a table, and unraveled one of the silk rolls onto it.

Revealed in shimmering emerald against saffron and golden hue is an image of a stone temple high above on a mountain. Worshipers gathered in droves, stacked up atop one another in a style like Giotto. The jungle wrapped around them brimming with tigers and birds and flowers. Each leaf of the foliage shimmered with green dye against its silken sheen. The worshipers glowed a brazen hue, and the sky is a shocking blue.

The appraiser who took a close look at the item, examined the image, and the make of the tapestry. He turns to me and lowers his glasses.

"This is a Cambodian pidan. It dates back to at least 1825, but no earlier than 1750."

"Oh, really?" I ask.

"Aren't you supposed to take this down?"

"Yes. Of course. Right."

I had to size this score up. I took out my pen and get to the appraisal form, and started collecting the details.

"The article is pure silk, and hand woven. Style suggests it was woven in the north of Cambodia, east of the Mekong river."

"You can tell all that?" I asked him

"Since the actions of the Vietnam war pieces of this kind have become increasingly rare. This, along with their exceptional craftsmanship makes them rather valuable. This is countered by their obscurity, putting them in low demand outside of historical museums. Nevertheless, I would appraise this piece as somewhere in the neighborhood of seven-hundred and fifty thousand dollars."

He looked over my shoulders as I was taking down the details.

"No." He said "Thousand."

I got carried away and wrote in some extra zeros. I quickly corrected this with apologies. And we continued our appraisal with details that were excruciatingly boring. I kept looking up at the treasure vault before me. It was more than I could have dreamed in there. It's everything I need. Finally we were done with the rag.

"Well, sirs." I said calming my breath, chilling my sweat, and trying to regain professional composure over elated excitement and mania, "I will forward these details to the office and we will begin insuring these goods as soon as possible.

I turn and walk back to my Audi. I'm pretty sure I saw a painting that was at least in the style of Renoir if not an original.

I had stepped inside and saw old German beer steins from the fifteenth century. There was a Japanese Katana. I'd beheld ancient wood and forged steel of artifacts treasured from before my great grandfather was born. Among it all was gold and silver.

I'm out of control right now. I need to get laid. I thought I'd call Sherman, who was one of the fellas who showed up at my Halloween party. He's a guy that can party. Then I'll call Martha.

"She'd be up for a threesome." I said to myself as I got in.

I started the car thinking to myself that everything I need is right here. The doomsday fund has a purpose, and it is for this moment. I have to act now, as well. With financial clouds gathering in the distance, there may only be a few weeks to act. I can do this. Already plans are forming. I can do it all.

It's all over. I've won.

I am a God.

Send questions, Comments, thoughts to

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