

Whiskey Burns Faster

Jessica Klimesh

If there were a list, it would be of the things he gave her, of the purple lava lamp, the violet crystal, the hand-crafted turquoise ring, the Victoria's Secret panties, a stuffed moose, a blank journal, a book of Sylvia Plath's poetry, and and and. And it would be of the things he took from her. Her virginity and her heart victorious. Because love is youth. Because love is forever and the moon is glass.

Because she took from him, too. His black t-shirt with the infinity symbol. After spending the night at his place. Slept in it for years, until it was threadbare and aching, long after the two of them had ritualistically parted, agreeing to stay friends. And they did. Stay friends. Against the odds of rationality and logic. And now. The moon is paper and she wishes she still had the shirt, the faint, if imagined, scent of him in the cotton.

Then there was the time. A poetry reading at Picasso's, where he precluded his poem with: "This is for a girl I used to love." And she doesn't remember whether the poem was good or bad or or or because the moon is wood now, and she wants to set it on fire.

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That was all years ago, but death reawakens the living in time and now it's back again, and she is awake and tumbling, has been will be awake for a month, she has not been sleeping, has been coveting sleep, eyes look with dissatisfaction at the yearning for sleep and the dreams they come with flames and failure and guilt. Ever since she found out, it's been the weight of fatigue, fatigue in the day's mundane how are yous and oh, it's nice weather chit-chat. Lesson plans. Meetings. Student papers to grade. Did she pay her utility bill? The immensity of the shallowness of it all all all.

The clock-radio melts in front of her like sullen used-up candle wax. The moon, its repositioning, the phases of life, waxes and wanes and her thoughts her thoughts her thoughts are always of him now. She wants to crush the glass moon, wad up the paper moon, and burn the wood moon, to keep her mind from spinning spinning toward a chasm, toward him, toward everything that happened in the twenty years since she met him. Him. To every drink they had together, clinking shot glasses of Hot Damn 100, then touching tongues. To every drink he had alone, the ones she didn't know about. To every conversation: him telling her he totaled his car, lost his license, but turned his life around (again). To every wound: carving one another's initials in their arms, ogling the blood, grinning grinning. To every slow kiss and every rushed want of skin, sweat, skin, sweat, and entanglement. To the agony in his eyes the last time they saw each other, as he, newly divorced, lamented his decisions of love with I-don't-know-why-I-married-her-she-wasn't-evenmy-type-but-you,-you're-my-type. To which she had shrugged and smiled, unsure of what to say. He was just over a year sober (for a third time), but it was too too late. At thirty-five, he was the same as he had been at eighteen. But she was completely different.

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The numbers on the clock and it will be years before she sleeps again. This this that keeps her dissatisfied awake and glowing crazy. This this of him. Of their first date on a November Friday night, a month after they'd met. At a coffee house where they indulged in multiple cappuccinos and then, spurred by the caffeine, wrote poetry on the walls and on the tables and on the chairs and sketched out their lives for each other. Plans and plans and plenty of time. Time. Back at her apartment she poured him a drink, and, just eighteen, he told her he'd never been drunk before, had only tasted alcohol once. She said it was fine fine. She was older and wiser and pretended she knew, drink after drink, as the sun dallied, waiting to take the moon's place. Time stretched out, and when the sun couldn't wait any longer, she kissed him their first kiss. And then they drank to that, too.

And some nights, under the glow of the Christmas lights in her bedroom. Fervid inspiration. Living, breathing, and igniting. Fire and poetry. Vibrations of art and color. They talked about the bookstore and coffee house they'd own one day. The books they'd write. The songs. The poems. They dreamed so big that the clouds looked small. He strummed his guitar while she painted. A lighter to the canvas. Flames. They laughed. Words spread out on paper. Slow sad music. They drank hard. Shots of darkness, shots of light. Kahlua, rum, tequila, vodka, whiskey. Discovery. Vodka burns the throat, but whiskey burns faster.

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He drove her to the cemetery, told her he loved the peacefulness of the gravestones, their promise of tranquility, said he wrote poetry there. He drove her up Muncy Mountain, and she watched the silence of the trees go past her, the solitude of the Pennsylvania landscape. And she knew then that it was love, such young and long ago love, and she was going to tell him, but he broke the silence, broke the spell, pointed to where a dead body had been found the year before. A girl from his old high school. Just a freshman.

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In the 3 a.m. darkness, wrapped in blankets of insomnia, a snoring dog next to her, a faculty meeting in four and a half hours, and soft tears, she replays their last exchange—a brief light-hearted message on social media—some mindless bric-a-brac about an old TV series. Not even a good-bye. Finality hits her like a roundhouse kick to the stomach. She wrestles for breath. Because now it's only it's only it's only. Only a box full of memories—the journal, the ring, the magnetic poetry they bought together, books, and her own poetry with his handwritten notes in the margins and and and. Memories, photographs, and dust to dust.

The clock-radio alarm alarms her, she has just fallen fallen. Asleep and dreaming, holding hands with his ghost, while he's in the cemetery, deep in the earth. She wonders if he feels peace, calm, and order, those things he couldn't attain in life. Those things he couldn't find in the bottle.

Those things those things and the moon is plastic now and can't be shattered like glass into millions of shards, and it can't be torn like paper, shredded shredded to obscurity. She pictures him writing in the stillness. Eternal poetry. Forever and ever and ever words.

A flame to the moon and the plastic melts. The wooden moon burns burns, a campfire. Smoke in the distance. The scent of time. She inhales. Exhales. Ugly spastic breaths. The light whirring off the clock on her nightstand. Numbers folding into morning's mourning.

The way they threw spiteful words like stones but always came back to each other. Always until. Until they couldn't anymore.

It consumes her. The wakefulness of thoughts, the slow replay of motion, how they can't go back and begin again. How they can't rewind time from the drinks they had and the games they played. The moon was in love once before, and she is to blame.

But if she could, would she do it differently? Knowing what she knows. Knowing the impossibility of knowing. Now knowing.

Or would it be be be, just like this morning's darkness, which is tonight's darkness, which is every night's darkness, and sleep won't ever ever come until the moon has fallen asleep and is no longer glass, paper, wood, or plastic. Until the moon is just the moon again.

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