

A photograph of a classroom with wooden desks and windows. The room has dark wood paneling on the lower half of the walls and light-colored walls above. There are three large windows with dark frames, each with a small framed picture hanging on the wall between them. The desks are made of light-colored wood and are arranged in rows. The floor is made of dark wood planks.

# Unbalanced Memories

Huan M. Nguyen

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UNBALANCED  
MEMORIES

Huan M. Nguyen



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For everyone that went through  
tumultuous relationship moments in  
high school and college, and beyond.

Discovering yourself, learning about the world, and the people in it, around you —it's not always a fun process. It's filled with dramatic moments, heartbreaking lows and stunning highs, all of which I know seemed so important at the time. The title is a nod to how important they seemed at the time, and how they're just distant memories now.

Enjoy this collection, laugh at it, and remember not to take it too seriously; we don't take our old drama with old friends and old flames that seriously either.

## *Always and Sometimes*

Rebecca was the one who'd derided his dancing. She'd make fun of the way he'd miscount steps, or lose time, the way he'd been unable to converse while waltzing. She was a loose cannon. Usually a cannon loosed and aimed at his

heart. She used to berate him for a slight lacking in his intellect. Use your common sense. The sarcasm dripping from the words still stung, years later.

She had nagged him endlessly, about picking up his clothes, picking her up from work, about the way he acted without thought sometimes, always piercing his heart with the icy spear of sarcasm.

It still burned to remember how she'd fly into moods, or come home from wherever she was, stewing

with anger that would boil over onto his skin, skin that eventually grew thick and hard.

Of course, ice cut deeper and hurt more than flames ever did.

His throat still clenched over the vague, unclear mess that had been her connection to Jake. He'd never known for sure, and never would. There would be no closure, no resolution, no smiles of happiness, no gasps of relief. There would not be tears of despair, nor short gasping breaths of betrayal, would

not have averting of the eyes, nor resolution and closure for him.

The paralyzing grief that he wasn't enough - never would be - only grew heavier under her biting assurances that he wasn't. Rolling eyes, tiny huffs of exasperation, constant questionings all were a roiling flow of water, eroding the shores of his resolve and sanity.

But they hadn't washed away, not completely, and he knew that only she was to thank for it.

Raena was the one who'd smiled

and clapped with glee after they'd won the competition. It was trivially easy to recall her eyes turn toward him, shining, her smile taking over his vision. It was the same smile that she wore when he walked, the same smile that lit up his sky when he caught her glancing at the diploma on the wall, proudly displaying the letters 'M' and 'S' in rigid black ink. I'm so proud of you, Seth. He imagined the words, years later.

She had read with him

enthusiastically, as he made the addition to lifting weights. His fingers exercised the ability to turn pages, to feed the protein to his brain muscles. After finishing a book, she'd want to talk with him, about what happened or what they learned, what he thought of the book, always ready to challenge his ideas and help them learn together.

It still lifted his lips to remember how she touched her forehead with three fingers when concentrating or thinking hard, how just one of her

eyes narrowed slightly as she tilted her head, rolling over new information in her mind. His mind grew sharp and well-read with her around. His heart grew strong and calm, and he faced new intellectual challenges, her support giving him the same confidence he felt against physical challenges.

Of course, she was there to help him up after the inevitable failures that always ended up turning into successes.

His hands still relaxed when he

remembered how her fingers danced and slid over his when he pulled her in close, lying behind her. She'd told him once that she liked having his six foot three bulk (she assured him it was nicely sculpted muscle) behind her, like he protected her from whatever needed protecting from. He'd smiled lovingly, forgetting to tell her that the strength to do so came from knowing she lay safe in his arms, a supportive spirit touching his back as he faced whatever needed facing.

The tenderness in his heart threatened to burst over sometimes, when he looked at her and had to catch his breath. It happened most often early in the mornings, when her dreams were the most vivid and he'd wake to her fingers clutching at his arms and hands, knuckles white. Even asleep, kisses on the top of her head - she said it made her feel safe, like she was underneath a strong shelter - and little strokes of the spot on her shoulder made her hands relax, leaving impressions in

his skin he was more than glad to bear.

He exhaled, swirling the wine in the glass as Rebecca and Raena fought for possession of his mind and memories. It didn't escape his attention, as it never had, that Rebecca's hair hung slightly unkempt, promising the beauty that Raena's possessed, sleek and thrown back into an unassuming ponytail. He knew, as he always had, that the cold hazel of Rebecca's eyes was equally matched by the

warmth radiating from Raena's, the exact same shade.

The wine struck with the tang, in the same moment that the memory struck. There were a few times that he'd swept Rebecca into his arms and kissed the top of her head, cutting off the tirade about to cascade from her mouth. Her arms had always encircled him with their grudging acceptance that slowly became more. Raena's embrace felt like home.

Sometimes Raena's eyes would

harden, unforgiving as winter frost, and he remembered mentally wincing, having a fervent wish to never see the expression again.

Sometimes he'd sleep on the couch when Rebecca was angry. She'd give in if he pressed the issue, but in a twisted way, he liked giving her the bed. And sometimes the kisses and soft caresses wouldn't help, and Rebecca would push him in the direction of the door he'd come running in, declaring quietly and venomously that she didn't need

or want them. He'd lay on the couch, watching the room lighten with the sun.

The wine flowed into him, reminiscent of the coffee he'd sip in the mornings, of the coffee he'd bring to her. The alcohol singe lessened, just as Rebecca's anger would, and brought a comforting warmth, just as it did when she would set aside the mug he brought and wrap her arms around him, pulling him into bed and tightly against her.

Raena used to hold him tightly against her in those mornings that she'd had the dreams. In the morning sun, the dreams of earlier always seemed so silly, she'd said, but it still helped to have him to hold onto. She never remembered clutching him in the early hours, or that he sometimes wasn't there when she tossed and turned, fingers clenching the blankets, never remembered that some mornings he wasn't already there, but had dashed in after hearing her whimpers and

mumbled words.

Rebecca would never know, but Raena had been his constant companion in spirit from the night he'd called out her name. His cheek still stung and he sometimes thought he could see, in the mirror, the handprint on the left side of his face. He remembered, without a doubt, the look of crushing betrayal on Rebecca's face. He remembered perfectly the feeling of closing his eyes, the bitter, bitter feeling of knowing he'd never be able to

explain, mixed in with the small amount of vindictive triumph at seeing the pain in her eyes, a pain he knew his own had shown.

The self-disgust for that triumph had eaten away at his self-respect, until Raena had assured him that though she disapproved greatly, she loved him still, for being natural. He had refused the truth in her words until it was shoved in his face by the knowledge that revenge was a natural concept, even if he wanted nothing to do with it.

He wished, most of the time, that he could tell Rebecca about how Raena had guided him when he felt lost, how he had thanked her time and again for supporting him unconditionally. He wanted to tell her about how it had been the greatest release and relief of his adult life to let his tears run down his face, soaking into the fabric of the jacket she wore over that favorite green dress of hers.

It had never been possible to tell Rebecca, and never would be. He

hoped at least Raena knew, and knowing her, she probably did.

The last drop of wine ran down the glass, and he savored the splash of flavor. He could imagine what Raena would be saying, and it was clear from her gentle tone in his mind that while he'd allowed himself this indulgence tonight, it was time to retire and sleep.

*Maybe sleep will help you to not be such an idiot.*

*Sleep well, baby. I always do with you.*

He listened as he always did to her voice, then allowed the blackness to claim him.

## *Casual Acquaintances*

It started when she sidled up to the circle he was standing in. No more than a casual acquaintance to Will, Hannah nevertheless captured his eyes and his attention at the worst of times. He wondered wryly if he meant best of times, when he

was a little drunk and it was just friends around the house.

It really started when he, singing enthusiastically and drunkenly along to the pounding music, noticed Hannah standing nearby with a tiny smile. She cocked her head and grinned. "Have you lost it yet?"

Amazingly enough—in Will's intoxicated mind—that was the name of the song. He laughed a little harder than was probably necessary, and a huge smile stretched his cheeks, the sensation

lending larger wings to his drunkenness. "You know the song!"

She laughed right along with him and obligingly stretched for the hand he extended, for a high five. When his thoughts locked on to how her hand felt pressed against his, Will felt the tide of apprehension sweep him, and fought valiantly against it. *She's cute, but I'm not going to think anything of it, or do anything.*

Stepping away, Hannah left Will with a wink. Normally, he would

have smiled happily at her companionable gesture and continued on singing with abandon. The small, uninhibited grin left him standing, mouthing the song half-heartedly. *Oh, fuck.*

The rest of the gathering passed by, and become a blur whenever he tried remembering it in later times. Only snippets of events made themselves known, despite his best efforts; the alcohol proved stronger than his recall ability. A bottle of beer here, and there, a glass of

wine, of which more than a few he remembered. Will thought he remembered the taste of Chris's secret recipe stuffing in the turkey, and Liz's wonderfully flaky apple pie. The blaring of the football scores was a vague recollection, as was the conversation of the night.

What he remembered in more detail, but only just, were those snatches of conversation and interaction with Hannah. Will winced at the cliché when he recalled the memories, but during

the whole time, he only knew he wanted more of the conversation, more of the secretive smiles she sent his way, more of her arm pressed against his.

"Will?"

He jerked out of his drunken haze. Noting with surprised approval the glass of whiskey Hannah clutched in her right hand, Will took the cigar she offered with her left, which was currently much too close to his right arm for his mind to be fully comfortable with.

He raised the cigar to his lips, speaking clearly around it with skill born of practice. "Mm?"

"Let's come out here again at three." The wistfulness was evident in her face, and in her voice. When he noticed the latter, Will definitely knew he was noticing a lot more about her than he wanted. *I am so... definitely... fucked.*

He blinked and exhaled, watching the smoke dissipate into the air. Leaning back against the stone wall of Chris's house, where

they were sitting, Will held the cigar between his forefinger and thumb up to Hannah's face.

She leaned forward and, instead of taking it with her own fingers, closed her lips around the end. Will couldn't very well pull it from her mouth while she pulled the smoke into her body, but he didn't think he could very well stand her lips touching his fingers for much longer either. He closed his eyes briefly, forcing his face and breathing even.

Unfortunately, with his eyes

closed, the only sensory input for Will came from his fingers. Fortunately, Hannah pulled away and breathed out, slowly. He ruthlessly shut down the sigh of relief that threatened to escape, and brought the cigar to a safer place. He paused before inhaling, to question, "Why? It's going to be disturbingly cold on Chris's back porch at three in the morning."

"Well, I hear it's going to be possible to see some shooting stars tonight." Hannah lifted the whiskey

and swallowed. "I know it's going to be cold."

She shivered a bit at the fact, and Will repressed the urge to lay an arm around her shoulders and pull Hannah against his body. Instead, he forced his voice to obey. "I'd like to see."

Hannah's fingers grabbed at his right arm, heedless of the cigar, and his eyes slid closed once more. He opened them quickly, in time to see her turn to him after examining the golden watch on his wrist. "It's only

eleven now. I think a nap would be great, I don't want to fall asleep out here."

Will acquiesced, and stood up, offering a hand to help her up. He held on longer a moment longer than was polite and necessary, and Hannah smiled. Letting go, she turned and strode into the house, pulling him along.

There was a flash of the kitchen. He noted that though the room spun slightly, he could still clearly see Richard and Julia standing rather

closer than was publicly acceptable. Will saw the furtive kiss Julia laid upon Richard's shoulder, the man's shiver a feeling that Will had been acquainted with repeatedly over the evening. His memories informed him that they'd had a rocky relationship that had *definitely* ended some months previously, as well as both having current significant others here at Chris's house tonight.

Then the sight passed as Hannah pulled him along, and they passed

through the halls leading towards the bedrooms, but not before his eyes met Clark's shocked gaze.

It took until Hannah had dropped onto the bed in one of the guest rooms, yanking Will down next to her, that Will realized before the evening, the woman next to him had been nothing more than a casual acquaintance, as well as Clark's recent ex-girlfriend. His eyes widened as Hannah turned on her side and pulled insistently on Will's arm until he lay behind her. She

guided his hand so that his arm draped over her side, and clasped it in her own, just below her chin.

Will's judgment was infinitesimally impaired, in his own opinion. So, impressed with his use of the large word despite being just a little drunk, and confident of his own judgment, his logical thoughts lost out on the short battle of morals. Hannah giggled as he pulled her in closer.

The pounding, thick feeling in his head was the first thing Will knew.

The second was much more pleasant. His eyes flew open as the second feeling was identified as Hannah's hair in front of his face, smelling sweetly of something flowery. Will wet his lips nervously, barely noting the fuzzy taste in his mouth.

It was a tense few minutes of extricating himself from Hannah's grasp before Will slipped from the bed, and realized thankfully that his clothes were still on and ruffled from sleep only. He padded quietly

towards the open door, groaning softly to himself at the fact it was sickeningly easy to see into the room from the hall.

Will trudged down the hall as quietly as he could; his watch informed him that there remained forty-some minutes until five in the morning. His bleary glance out a nearby window supported the evidence and he moved on.

The next bleary glance at a couch in the next room turned into a double-take. Will's breath caught as

his brain caught up. Yes, there were people on the couch that he shouldn't disturb. No, they were not sleeping; he could clearly see the movements as the man's hands caressed underneath the woman's shirt, and along and between her legs. Yes, they were Richard and Julia and *oh shit what the fuck happened to Daisy and Dean I need to not be seeing this I need to be in the bathroom right now.*

Will shut and locked the door as quietly as he could, and stared in

the mirror. The drunken haze lifted, he realized a battle of morals would be much, much longer, and very, very tiring.

Abruptly, Will straightened up. Deciding mentally that he was done with with Richard and Julia's emotional antics, he made to unlock the door as low voices made themselves heard outside. He set his face and eyes, then opened the door, striding quietly by Richard and Julia, who gave no sign that they knew he was ignoring them.

*Probably too wrapped up in getting ready to get cozy in the bathroom.*

Nevertheless, curiosity and morbid fascination won out. Will stood just down the hall, in the convenient shadow of a tall plant. Snickering at how it reminded him of cartoons, Will stood motionless next to the plant.

Richard and Julia grasped hands then made to enter the bathroom. Interestingly, they hesitated, and remained outside, hands gesturing

and heads shaking. *It looks like... like they're having second thoughts. Good. They deserve the guilt.*

Julia pressed against him, and Will watched as Richard's hands drifted down and fingers spread against her admittedly cute rear, clutching at the tight, white jean shorts.

He raised an eyebrow unconsciously, as they moved to kiss, and again hesitated. *Having third thoughts?*

Richard released her, and Julia stepped back, gazing heatedly up at him. Will's breath hitched at the intense, undecided look on her face. Richard's was more even, his rapidly moving chest the bigger clue at the emotions roiling underneath, Will thought.

Will's vindictiveness and disgust with the pair receded for the moment, under the weight of the unrestrained emotion practically emanating from them. He thought he could see Richard's jaw clench, the

muscles standing out in his thought. Will definitely knew he saw the man's hands fist by his sides. *Well, there's definitely guilt and some second thoughts there.*

Without warning, there was a muted thud as Julia raised her fist and slammed the underside of it against Richard's chest, the man absorbing the blow stoically. Will's eyes widened as she kept her hand there a second longer.

He was struck by the raw, unsuppressed feeling on her face

and, he was sure, in her eyes. The tension struck a chord in him, and Will found himself wishing that he was in Richard's position, if only to be on that side of such a pure, honest expression. He caught himself wishing for a woman to stir his heart so powerfully, and to move hers in return, without care of the pain nor passion in such a moment.

Will closed his eyes and bowed his head, feeling the longing, the yearning, wrenching at his chest.

When he opened them, Will caught a glimpse of Julia disappearing up the stairs to the second floor, where he guessed Dean would be sleeping. He watched as Richard bowed his head, unknowingly mimicking Will, who knew that there was no going back for them.

Even if Richard could have approached Julia in the next few seconds, Will knew that the moment had passed, and it would never, ever be recaptured again.

The storm had swept through both

Richard and Julia with raw and pure power, and had left barren land in its wake.

Years later, Will would remember the morning well. He questioned whether Richard, after feeling how Julia let out the emotion she couldn't handle, should have leaned down and captured her in a kiss then and there, and damn the consequences.

## *Lynna*

You picked up the pack of cigarettes, and it was empty. It wasn't hard to get angry when you saw her put the last one to her lips and light it, a smug smirk thrown your way. It was a long day. That's no excuse, but you were angry

anyway.

It's not hard to work up a fury when you see how she treats your things with careless abandon.

Clothes are thrown, your books are tossed aside haphazardly, your car is barely acknowledged as anything more than a magic, unbreakable carpet, and your temper rises all the while.

All this makes you miss Cara. It's not hard to feel bad about her. It's easy to miss her soft kisses, the way she used to touch your shoulder

whenever she passed. When you think about her, it's also easy to remember how she'd caress your cheek, and you'd turn your head to lay a gentle kiss on her fingers.

You want that again. You want to feel Cara's understanding hug when you come home from a stressful day, and you want to feel the laughter that inevitably bubbled up when you two cooked dinner together.

It's easy to want anything else when you're arguing with Lynna. Compared to cooking with Cara,

your current position as solo cook of the house seems like you're drawing geometric shapes, instead of painting the wonderful landscapes on the tongue, like you used to.

It's even easier, when your thoughts are drifting like this, to let your eyes drift too. Like always, they tend to wander from her harsh gaze down to her lips. The contrast is jarring at times. Lynna's hostile glare can be diamond-tipped, but her lips are never anything other

than a soft, smooth heaven.

And, it's absolutely no trouble at all for you to ignore her stinging insults. Not when the sting she leaves on your cheek is fresh and raw. You hope your beard itches her hand. It's a childish thing, but it brings a tiny smile to your face anyway.

Besides, it's been a while since you've smiled around Lynna, it seems.

It's hard to know that you and her are supposed to care for each other,

but what you're really doing is trading insults and shouting at each other in your car, parked in your garage. The garage is shut, and so are the car doors. You're both sitting bolt upright, glaring at each other. You suppose that you're both hoping your eyes will communicate the anger your words can't.

Neither of you have made a move to get out because you started fighting over dinner, and it's playing out like all the other times. You can't remember what you had

tonight. Maybe it was the Norwegian salmon? No, that was Saturday, and today is Monday. The gourmet burger you had last Wednesday is more clear in your memory than tonight's dinner. The fights from both nights seem like one continuous prequel to this one.

It's hard to think of a time where you went out and came home happy together. In fact, *deja vu* is saying hello, while *Lynna* says she wishes she had never moved in with you, that she could have done so much

better.

A retort occurs to you this time, and her eyes widen indignantly when you tell her that if you're such a loser, she'll never do better because she can't even make a loser like you happy.

Lynna sputters furiously, and it's almost cute, in some twisted way. A small part of your mind idly wonders why things are so twisted, wonders how you got to be so deranged to think of this as 'cute'. It's hard to remember when it was

cute how she looked up at you through her lashes when she got nervous. Now the looks she gives you are mostly down her nose, with the occasional disgusted sideways glance thrown in. Lately, everything you do or say nets you a look. Usually, it's bad. Mostly, you don't care.

You come back to the present when your heart withers while Lynna tells you just exactly what she regrets about "this whole thing, this stupid relationship with you"

(everything). Then you're gone again. You can worry about the crack in your heart later, because right now, your mind wonders why Cara was so easy to let go of.

It must be true that Cara and her caring, patient manner were infinitely better than Lynna and this eternal argument of a relationship interrupted by moments of doting and adoration. But it's hard to miss Cara's calm gaze when you look at Lynna's wild eyes.

Maybe it's because Cara's gaze

gave you eternity to relax and bask, even as it stole your heart and your breath. Lynna's certainly doesn't. Her hostile glare pounds at you to fucking listen, right now, now, now. Which is precisely what you're not doing.

Right now, you aren't hearing a word she's saying. You just want to press your lips to hers, despite... no, because of the poison dripping from the smeared lipstick. It's acquired an addictive quality recently. When? You don't know. But why

should it go through your head when it can go straight into your system?

You want to catch her hand the next time she slaps you, and pull her onto your lap. The thought itself is easier to control than the reactions of your body that it brings. It's easy to shove the thought away and lock it somewhere far in your mind, but it's much harder to calm the quick breath and speeding heart the thought gave you.

In a moment of weakness, you glance at Lynna's lips, hating

yourself as you do, and averting your eyes as quickly as you can. You may have done it, but you sure as hell aren't going to keep staring like that.

However, she notices, and a snarl emits from between her teeth, which show in a vindictive sneer. You maintain your stony silence as she accuses you of being a pig just like every other guy, but without the skill to back it up.

The car door slams. You're standing in the door to the kitchen

silently, because your brain is currently stuck on livid fury, leaving no room for the creativity needed for retorts. Focusing on the taut muscles in your clenched hand makes it easier to remain in control, but it's a tough thing.

Lynna, following you in, screams at you to look at her as you drop your keys onto the counter with a clatter. You consent to pause, if not look her in the eyes, and she marches up to you, hair askew and (it's hard not to notice) breasts

heaving. You close your eyes briefly to fight against the desire to pull her to you.

Then she crosses the line, one that you've repeatedly moved back for her. You knew exactly what you were doing each time, and now you realize just how weak it had been of you. Lynna leaps over the line, observes acidly that all the love letters and surprise gifts and thought-out celebrations for significant dates were cheap gimmicks and tricks.

It's not hard to call her a bitch. You'd like to say it slipped out, but you know damn well it was said, you meant to say it, and you meant it. You put a colossal amount of hard work and thought into each and every gift and surprise. You poured out all the tenderness and adoration your heart was going to burst from. It all went into every little love note. You meant it all, every single word, and she's going to respect that, at the very least.

The smack echoes throughout the

kitchen. Your head turns with the blow to soften the impact. What was a receding throb renews into a buzzing sting. She begins to tell you that's for calling her a bitch, and she owes you more. You ignore her tirade and turn back to face her fully. It's certain that she can practically feel the sheer fury in your muscles, the raw lust in your veins. You can't tell the desire apart from the anger. One, or both, is making you breathe in shallow, rapid actions. Your fingers clench

and relax. Do you want to put them around her throat? Or do you want to put them around her enticingly smooth neck as you show her exactly what you're feeling?

Whatever it is, you hear Lynna's voice falter as you meet her eyes, and her tongue darts out to wet her lips. You snort, an ugly and derisive sound, and turn away.

It's barely acknowledged when Lynna tells you again to "fucking look at her", and the strong—if ineffectual—punch to the arm

doesn't help her cause.

You do decide to gaze furiously at her, and because in all honesty, you couldn't want her more. It's hard to tell if it's the strapless emerald dress that you just want to hike up her legs, or the raw tone of her voice, but the pull is just as strong as the anger that pushes you away.

A flicker catches your eye. Your right hand flashes up to intercept the left slap that she presumably intends to land on the unmarked side of your face.

You return her blazing gaze. It's a struggle to be mindful of how hard you're holding her wrist. It's tempting, admittedly. But you won't be the kind of man that hurts her like that.

There's not much you can do. Not much besides feel an enormous rush of desire sweep you in the burning look she gives you, because things move fast.

Her right hand darts out, grips your starched collars, fingers locked in the fabric. Lynna steps

toward you. You release her arm. It wraps around your neck.

She completes the movement, leaping at you and pulling you by the shirt. Another pounding heartbeat, and Lynna's other hand is on the back of your head. You have a moment to circle your arms around her waist and pull as if for life.

Then Lynna is crushing your lips with hers. A leg locks one of yours in place.

It's too much, obliterating the

rigid control you've held over yourself this whole time.

You yank her body into you. She's a step ahead, jumping to wrap both legs around your waist.

Breathing is difficult. You don't care. There's no need to. Talking is difficult. It doesn't matter. The wild gasps speak for the both of you. Then you're suddenly able to breath.

Lynna's pulled away, panting, and she glares at you with raw, unrestrained temper. Part anger and part desire, you know that she's

going to resolve what she's feeling somehow. It's not going to be pleasant. It never has been.

This time, you're half wrong. She lunges back at you, but at your neck. Your breath catches as she trails her tongue along your skin, dropping kisses every so often. This is what it was like before—

You clamp down on a howl, releasing only a muffled growl. Lynna bites harder, and it drives any last coherent thought out of your mind.

Everything is animalistic, instinctive, you want her to feel what you're feeling.

A hand raises to her head, you tangle your fingers in Lynna's soft locks—

Muffled moans travel through the flesh of your neck, where she bites down harder and oh *god*—

You whirl, slam her against the wall—

Lynna pulls back as far as the wall allows, and shoves your shoulders back with what force she

can muster. The first thing you notice when you're able to think again is a small, damp-feeling area on the stomach of your shirt. You can't see, because your eyes are shut tight. One hand yanks insistently on your tie, the other grabs you and you begin to slide your hands down Lynna's back towards—

She slaps your arms away and her lower hand grasps your belt. One heated look into your eyes and a command to "fucking get this shit off" is enough for you.

The gold buckle clatters to the ground at the same time her undergarments do. Just as your fingers begin work on the button fly, Lynna again slaps your arms away. You let her do her thing, grasping her shoulders and placing your lips on her neck.

Lynna's rolled away in the darkness, and you're left to contemplate the fact that this is the first time the both of you have shared a bed in weeks. It's much

more comfortable than the small couch you bought when you first moved in. She wanted the leather couch, but you wanted the micro-suede. Now you're glad that you didn't give in, because of how many nights you've spent on it lately.

Sometimes Lynna comes in before you fall asleep. She insists on taking the couch for the night. Tears fall from her pretty eyes as she apologizes for being so bitchy, for making you sleep out here so much. You usually respond with a

gentle smile and contentedly fall asleep in the large bed.

Then came the morning (was it this morning...?) where you both woke up and nothing had changed after a fight. You let slip a rude comment, and she goes off, ranting about how she even took the couch for you and you couldn't be bothered to try and be nice and maybe even thank her about it.

It doesn't help when you point out that you've taken the couch for the past couple weeks (it must have

been this morning).

The memory of the morning makes you wince, but it makes you feel grateful for the fact that you're sharing the bed now.

Sharing isn't exactly a concept you and Lynna are familiar with anymore. All the glances stolen from strange men, the titters and giggles from strange women. Each little thing is a point stolen from the other.

You know this isn't exactly healthy, nor is it normal, but you

barely remember what they are anymore. This is your life now.

Laying in the dark like this, it seems like you're going just a little crazy. You think that maybe all this anger and resentment is because you both had great things in store, things that never came, leaving the both of you shivering in the cold and hating the fact that you hold each other to keep warm.

"Why can't we be happy, Nick?"  
Lynna's voice cuts through your mental ramblings, and you hold

back a surprised exclamation. She's clearly been thinking about this for as long as you've been musing to yourself.

You remain silent. No answer springs to mind. She rolls back over to look at the side of your face, as you rest on your back. "Nick."

"I don't know, Lynna."

"What happened?" She brushes off your statement. "Why can't we be like we were, when we moved in?"

Before you can think, you reply,

"I want to see that smile you gave me when we put the couch in."

A heartbeat. It lasts hours, during which you mentally slap yourself for blurting it out.

"So why not?" The heartbreaking longing is clear in her low voice, and you're sure that her eyes, filling with tears, would probably grind the pieces of your heart into dust. If you could see them. "We just fight all the time now." She pauses, and you hear her take a deep breath. "And I don't know if we can even

move on from that."

"We've said some pretty hurtful things." You agree. It's funny, somehow, because you haven't been in agreement—except to disagree—for a long, long time. Something strikes you, and you hope that you won't be setting off an explosion. Taking a deep breath, you plunge forward. "I'm sorry, Lynna."

She'll either explode at you, or... or ignore it outright. It won't be enough, or it won't be anything. She'll tell you that two words don't

make up for all the shit you've put her through, for every bit of unhappiness you've gone through together.

"I'm sorry, too."

Your eyes widen and you roll your head to try and look at Lynna in the dark. You can't see much, but you see her silhouette move closer, and then hesitate. Taking a gamble, you open your arms slowly, making sure as you can that she knows what you're doing.

To your immense shock, Lynna

scoots closer and rests her hand on your stomach, laying her head on your chest. It's been so long that it feels unfamiliar, but you wrap your arms around her automatically, anyway. You don't think that you could be startled any more than you already have, but Lynna proves you wrong.

She lays a gentle kiss on your skin, then pauses, as if waiting for your reaction. You realize that she most likely is, and that she went out on a limb for that one. Before you

know it, the words are tumbling out uncontrollably. "I started a lot of it. Made you take my lead, and look where that went."

Her hair slides across your chest as she shakes her head slightly. "A lot of it. Not all of it. I did, too."

The impulse to stroke her hair strikes you, and you give in. She stiffens, but then relaxes more than before. Silence reigns for a bit, before you speak up. "You're not really a bitch. I was being pretty mean."

She snorts, and the sound brings a small smile to your lips. "I really am. You can be, but not always."

It seems as if the bitterness and resentment have turned inward, and now you just want to slap the old you. "Talking bad about ourselves isn't going to get us anywhere. I want to make it up to you. I want to build something new. Things aren't going to go back to- what are you doing?"

As you were speaking, Lynna has been shifting her position, closer to

you and upwards. Her face is closer to yours, and at your question, her fingers tap impatiently on your chest. "Kiss me."

The urge to question it, question her, seizes you. You have no idea what she's thinking. You decide that everything else can go to hell for a bit, and find her face with your hands, gently. Lynna leans up, pressing against you, and you raise your head to meet her.

It reminds you of the first time you kissed, in her car. It was

impulse, really, and it set the tone for the relationship you would go on to have with her: full of impulse and rashness.

She tastes nice, you think, sweet somehow.

Pulling back, Lynna lets out a sigh that you can barely hear in the still room. "So what now?"

You don't know what's in front of you, but you know that you don't want to go back. So, you make it up on the spot and add a decisive tone to your voice. "We go to work

tomorrow."

She shifts, presumably to interrupt, but you tighten your arms around her briefly, and Lynna subsides as you continue, "First thing when we get home, we hug each other and ask how work went."

There's a pause as she waits to see if you have more. You don't. A soft laugh reaches your ears. "It's a start."

You kiss the top of her head from where it rests on your chest again. It's a little amazing how fast you

slipped back into being physically affectionate, and expressive about it as well. And how Lynna isn't blowing up like how things normally went.

"And we can start by going to sleep, because I'm exhausted."

You grin, knowing she can't see it. "I'm just that good."

A soft slap lands on your bare stomach, and you accept the teasing reprimand. Without a word, Lynna turns onto her side and tugs insistently on your arm until you roll

with her. She pulls the hand she still clutches up and underneath her chin, tucking your arm around her.

Satisfied, she lets out a tiny huff and you have to smile into her hair.

The only constant in your relationship, you think, is how fast you and Lynna can devolve from anything good. Maybe it also means you can change from bad to good quick as lightning, as well. You hope, anyway. It's a start.

## *Departure*

I was sure he was going to slap me. We'd never laid violent hands on each other, in the time that Michael and I had been together.

The evening had started innocently enough. We'd ordered takeout, brought it back home, and

settled on the couch to watch some Netflix with our food. A little boring, a little routine, but it was comfortable, low-key, and carried zero hint of what we were going to be later that night.

The movie was getting to its climax, but I was slowly falling asleep, head resting comfortably on Michael's shoulder.

His phone dinged on the other side of him from me, and I dozed off a little bit more, since I wouldn't have to move while he checked it. A

few taps on the screen later, Michael set the phone down with a small sigh. In hindsight, that small action was the beginning of something much bigger.

“Everything okay?” I blinked up at him.

*Something's wrong. He didn't kiss me like he always does to reassure me.*

Instead, he glanced at me, and I thought I detected a hint of resentment in his eyes. That hurt, especially because I had no idea

what brought this on.

“Uh, something wrong?” I really, really, *really*, hoped not.

A telling silence stretched out after my question. Just a little fearful, I raised my head off of his shoulder and peered anxiously at him. “Seriously, Michael. You’re starting to freak me out.”

He paused, then bowed his head, brown hair falling in front of his face. I didn’t feel like pushing it away so that the ends of the strands stopped tickling his cheeks, like I

usually did. I was too busy dealing with the mounting dread of whatever this could be. *Is he going to break up with me? Did I do something wrong?*

“It’s... my parents invited me- us. They invited us to dinner on Saturday,” he muttered. He said ‘us’ in a strange tone of voice.

“Okay... do you... do you not want to go?” I asked gently, hoping to narrow down what might be putting him off. “I remember, last time-”

“No, it’s not that.” Michael cut me off abruptly.

I waited for an explanation, shoving down my irritation at being interrupted so rudely.

When he didn’t explain any further, I pressed just a bit, not managing to fully hide the impatient tone to my voice. “So, what is it? Michael, I’m starting to worry like something happ-”

“No! No,” he bit out, and glared at me from through his bangs. I crossed my arms, pushing away the

anger. Not that I would be able to for much longer. “Serious-”

“Stop *saying* that!” Michael’s voice was too loud too suddenly, and I jumped, eyes widening. It was like I’d pushed him over some edge, pushed too far.

“You’re always saying that,” he continued, “and it’s driving me fucking *nuts*. ‘Seriously, Michael,’ ... ‘Michael, be more serious,’ ... ‘Michael, take this seriously!’”

His voice grew louder even as it

grew crueler in its imitation of me and I cracked. “Dammit Michael you know that’s just how I talk, I don’t actually-”

“And, my parents are always agreeing with you!”

That sentence stopped me cold. I guessed we’d gotten to the root of what had happened earlier (*feels like hours already that we were just snuggling together...*), before he sighed.

“They’re always like ‘Oh Michael, why don’t you invite

Natalie to come with you?’ and ‘Why isn’t Natalie here?’” Michael glared at me, as if it were *my* fault that his parents seemed to like me more than him, if that was what he was implying. *Or that was just an ugly thought on my part.*

I stared back with as flat of an expression as I could muster, just waiting for what I thought, expected, feared, wanted to come next; he didn’t disappoint.

Michael seemed to inflate, and he stood up. “I can’t do this any

longer.”

That got my hackles up. I started to say, “Well, if you’d just *said* some-”

“No,” he said sharply. “No.”

I clenched my jaw at being interrupted again, and decided I’d had enough. I was fed up. “Then go.”

Maybe I just wanted him to stay. I wanted him to sit back down and apologize and go back to cuddling me. But narrowed eyes gazed back at me, and he began to turn away.

The last little restraint I had gave way. “When you’re done running away, Michael, maybe then your parents won’t be telling you, ‘This is why Natalie is more mature than you.’”

He stood stock-still for a second, and gave me a glance full of betrayal and anger. I was too angry to care, too sad that he hadn’t told me sooner, too confused as to why he didn’t trust me or feel close enough to me to be open. I flicked my gaze towards the door, jerking at

it with my chin.

The veins stood out on Michael's neck, and I thought I saw his hand twitch. Instead, it clenched, and he turned away with a convulsive movement. "Fine. I get it. It's over. That's what you want, isn't it? I get it."

I looked towards the forgotten TV as his footsteps moved away, knowing he'd pause at the door and look at me for one last sign. Well, he wouldn't get it. Michael would have to make the first move in this;

I'd been the leader in the relationship for too long. If he wanted this, he'd have to fight for it. If he thought it was over, fine, who was I to say differently?

When somebody in a relationship speaks up about breaking up so readily—so quick to choose it as an option—, they've been thinking it silently for a long time. For Michael to jump to that conclusion so abruptly, well, he must have already had it in mind.

*If he doesn't want me... fine.*

There was a pause after the door opened, and I kept my gaze firmly on the TV, willing the tears to stay back. My vision blurred, and I didn't know how long he waited on the doorstep before I finally heard him move again, and the door shut.

A heartbeat later, I dropped my face into my hands and let the tears fall.

It had been a month since I'd seen Michael.

After our breakup, the town had

started feeling just a little too small, giving me almost a feeling of being hemmed in on all sides. The only logical solution, apparently, was to plan a solo trip to Europe.

*I'm so ready to leave, and I don't leave for another couple weeks yet.*

Closing the laptop, I stood and stretched, glancing around at the apartment; it was clean, almost utilitarian in how little I owned and spread around. It wouldn't take much for the place to seem like I'd

never been here.

It would feel like I'd only passed through here, even with all the memories I made.

*Memories like me and Michael on the cou-*

I cut off the thought and spun towards the kitchen, intent on making some home-cooked food for myself.

The phone rang, and I aborted my reach towards a frying pan, instead swiping the phone off the counter.

*Why is Michael's mom calling*

*me...?*

“Elizabeth?” I answered the phone just a little tentatively.

“Natalie!” She didn’t sound too angry. Actually, she didn’t sound angry at all. “Are you coming today?”

My heart sank. Today was the annual Moore family barbeque. I honestly hadn’t thought that I would be expected to show, what with the whole me-not-dating-Michael-Moore-anymore thing.

“I—,” Should I be honest with

her or just say I forgot? She'd know. I hesitated, then plunged ahead, "I thought I wouldn't be welcome. You know?"

"Nonsense! You're practically family," came the cheerful response. I grimaced, knowing what was coming. "Come over and join, it'll be just as fun as last year!"

Elizabeth and her husband Jay had always had a soft spot for me. Sometimes, me more than Michael, and looking back, he probably wasn't wrong that they liked me to

an almost disturbing extent when compared with Michael. I probably owed them at least this. Maybe...

“Alright. I’ll get ready and then come over.” Upon Elizabeth’s pleased acknowledgment, I said goodbye and hung up. Hopefully it wouldn’t be too awkward with Michael. I just prayed that he didn’t have a date to it.

It seemed to be a reoccurring pattern where Michael Moore and I were involved: bad luck on my part.

Or maybe I was just bad at predicting the best and good at thinking of the worst. Either way—I was here, Michael and his family were here, and this chick was here.

“Nice to meet you, I’m Emily.” Narrowed eyes made it clear she was anything but; she might as well have thrown an icicle at me, for all the warmth I felt in her greeting.

Not one to be intimidated by yet another jealous woman, I nodded politely and clasped her hand firmly for the briefest time that courtesy

allowed. “You too.”

Elizabeth, probably sensing the tension, quickly stepped in to usher me to the backyard to greet Jay, leaving Michael and Emily alone in the house.

*They'll probably get it on. Not that he'll be able to last long enough for them to be missed anyway.*

I shoved the ugly thought away, and managed a nice smile for Jay, who waved me over and began asking me about how I'd been.

*Things had been going so well...*

I groaned quietly to myself, watching Emily shoot venomous glares my way, as Elizabeth and Jay slipped pointed, not-so-subtle comments into the conversation. Most of them were meant to compare me favorably to Emily, and they were beginning to lose what little subtlety they'd started out with. At first, they'd felt great; it felt amazing to be a part of so many people cutting down Michael and

Emily. But honestly, for his own parents... Not for the first time, I wondered what I'd got myself into by dating Michael.

“So, Emily, you said you're working at,” Elizabeth hesitated, then continued, “the local pipe and tobacco shop?”

Emily nodded stiffly. Jay took the silence as an opportunity, and picked up the thread, turning to me. “And you, Natalie, you're still in the middle of applying to law school, right?”

The moment I'd heard my name, I'd shoved a big mouthful into my mouth, in order to feign manners and get time to think. Under the pretense of chewing slowly, I reached for my water, watching Emily watch Michael's knuckles turn white around his fork. As much dislike as I'd been feeling towards Michael, and therefore Emily, recently, they really didn't deserve this.

*Plus I hate being used for any kind of social maneuvering. At*

*least when I don't agree with it,  
and I don't here.*

I'd always been a very live-and-let-live kind of person, and my parents as well. Elizabeth and Jay butting so stubbornly into Michael's life rubbed me the wrong way, and I suddenly felt a flash of pity for him. He wasn't date-material anymore, never would be, but I felt less heartbreak now and more of a sad understanding. I'd been hurt by him, but I was strong. He'd been dealing with this his whole life. It didn't

excuse him, but it made his behavior more relatable.

“Yes.” I tried to send Michael a sympathetic glance, but it wasn’t well-received. Emily’s glares intensified, and Michael’s eyes darted around, anywhere but towards me. I looked over at his parents, searching their faces for an impending response; Elizabeth’s smile was stony, Jay’s was non-existent. They clearly wanted to make a point, and were going to force me to make it. I needed to fill

the silence. So I blurted out the first thing that came to mind. “Actually, I’m going to Europe pretty soon. I felt like being a little reckless, you know? Before I go off to school or work or the rest of my life or something, and so I booked a ticket and I’m leaving in the next couple weeks.”

Clearly, my attempt to downplay myself hadn’t worked. By the look on Jay’s face, I knew the attempt at weakly deflecting their attentions from Michael wasn’t appreciated,

and that they had clearly expected me to play along. Elizabeth smiled widely though, and I caught an ominous glint in her eyes. “Oh, Natalie, that’s wonderful! You know yourself so well!”

I prayed for them to relent, but no such luck. Jay chimed in, with narrow eyes, and such a flat, pointed tone, the true victim of his words was clear. “Yes, you know exactly when to apply yourself and how to work hard. You’ll be going places, that’s for sure.”

My eyes widened, watching Jay turn towards his own son, and I swallowed, keeping my breathing relaxed, even as I tensed. “Michael, what were you talking about doing in the next few months? School, right? Finish up that degree?”

Emily opened her mouth, but Michael’s hand slammed down onto the table and beat her to it. He sent one bitter and furious glare at me, then shoved his chair back. His date followed suit at a slower but no less upset temper. In the crushing,

livid silence, they whirled and left hand-in-hand.

*Last week really could have gone better.*

I was laying on my bed a week after the barbeque, excitement at leaving soon warring with the nagging feeling that had persisted after such a disastrous meal.

Something was in the back of my mind, struggling to come forward. But what?

Something had just felt *wrong*. It

had felt wonderful at first, to snipe at Michael with little jabs and Emily with barbed questions. But I just felt sick, thinking about it in hindsight. Doing that wasn't cool. It felt great, but now I felt like a big and bitter jerk. Actually, I kind of wanted to apologize to Michael and Emily.

*But how...? Especially with his parents and—oh.*

I had an idea.

The atmosphere in the my living

room was tense, to put it mildly. Elizabeth and Jay seemed willing, apprehensive, and slightly angry. Emily was as vindictive as ever, flashing frigid glances at me every so often. Michael was the worst.

*One verbal poke and he'll probably blow his top.*

I'd seen it enough times at the bars, and if I never did again, it would be too soon. But those days were behind us now.

“So...” I paused, wondering at how to go about this delicately. But

then, the blunt approach would probably be the only approach to work, anyway. I took a deep breath. “I’m sure you’re wondering why I asked you all to come here, especially you and Emily, Michael.”

She sniffed, and I quickly spoke again. This needed to be said before feelings went too high and the tension snapped. “I don’t know how to say this but right out. Jay, Elizabeth, I think you should apologize to Michael, for last week.

We, and I mean we, don't have the right to needle him like that about his life. It's his. And that's why I want to apologize to you, Michael.”

Now he looked like a deer in the headlights. Still furious, suspicious, but also shocked and confused. The words sped up, tumbling out of my mouth. “It's just... I'm leaving now. And that wasn't right. It's your life. And Emily's.”

At this, Emily sent me a slightly-less-hostile glance. Emboldened, I continued. “It's just that these are

our lives. We should be free to live them. And that means talking like adults, not needling each other passive-aggressively. Michael and Emily didn't need that. They're living their lives too. My flight leaves in six hours, and suddenly it seems like it's not worth it. And, well, yeah. I'll stop before I ramble into a rant."

*Oops. That comment about passive-aggressiveness probably was not a big hit with Elizabeth and Jay. They look just a little*

*mad. But who cares, I'm leaving in six hours, and probably never coming back to this again.*

Elizabeth shot me a look that said *we'll be having words* later, but honestly, I couldn't care less. I had no idea how I didn't see it before; dating Michael was like dating his parents as well, and the whole package ended up with me having to mother and be the adult in this. I was still hurting, but I was done with this, ready to close it out and move on to something else in my

life entirely.

Jay gave me the same even look, and turned to Michael. “She’s right, son. I’m sorry.”

I’d heard more sincere apologies from creeps at the bar. But, again, I was leaving in six hours. I let it slide.

Michael’s lips tightened, and he nodded sharply. Elizabeth, on seeing this, spoke up soothingly. “Yes, dear, we didn’t mean to be *needling* you. We’re always just concerned for you, you know this.”

I met Emily's gaze, and was surprised to find it was more in solidarity than anything. She tilted her head, and the meaning was clear. Not quite a thank you, not quite a warm acknowledgment, but certainly a lessening in hostility.

Jay picked back up. "Anyway, we had some chores to do around the house today. Will we be seeing you, and Emily, for dinner tonight?"

At Michael's glance to Emily and her stiff nod, Elizabeth half-smiled and took Jay's arm. "Wonderful,

dear, we'll see you soon.”

They left without further ado, and I stifled a scornful snort. They wouldn't change, but at least it wasn't my problem anymore.

“Natalie.”

I turned to see Michael approaching, something unreadable in his eyes. That was a little nerve-inducing, but I stood relaxed and alert. In the background, I saw Emily putting her purse on.

“Michael?”

He hesitated, and I saw

something more familiar in that. “I just wanted to say. Thanks, I mean. And. Well. I’m sorry. I hope you have a wonderful time in Europe and we stay in touch.”

It wasn’t enough, not by a long shot, and we both knew it. I saw it in his eyes, in the rehearsed lines.

Figuring it would be a better idea to just take the high road, avoid drama, and leave, I nodded. “Yeah. Thanks. Good luck.”

Michael searched my eyes for a second longer, a second longer than

I thought Emily might like.

*I don't need any more drama in this place right now.*

Breaking eye contact, I turned to Emily. “Thanks for agreeing to come and hear me out.”

I heard as Michael stepped to the door and opened it, but watched warily as Emily came closer. To my shock, she put her arms out and embraced me lightly. “Thank *you*, Natalie.”

There wasn't much else to say. We weren't close enough as friends

or enemies to really be that invested in each other. She disengaged, and flashed me a brief smile that, if not warm, was at least polite.

Michael clasped one of her hands, and the door shut behind them, leaving me alone in the apartment.

I stood there a moment longer, then pulled out the apartment key from my pocket, speaking out loud to the empty air. “Let’s turn this key in.”

*And get the hell out of here. I’m*

*ready for Europe, ready for  
something else now.*