**The Faint of Heart**

When I open my eyes, I realize I’ve been sleeping next to a bird-shaped nugget of mattress lint. It is tiny. And dark. It is dipping its beak in a wasteland of loose threads, mites and body hair. I look up at the cloudy morning, peeking through the shuddered blinds. I don’t move my head in case the appearance of the bird is dependent on the particular angle at which I rest. His name is Bertrand. I imagine him chirping a tune.

My mattress is tough. Yellowed and stinking beyond restoration. It’s a tossup every night whether I sleep beneath or above my single microfiber blanket. I cannot wrap myself. My body needs space to jerk in the night. I will not burden myself with unnecessary sheets.

For a time I was using my sister Anna’s spare sheets. When Juno started coming over I thought it would be courteous to have some ready in case she ever suggested spending the night. She has now seen my barren, unhomely apartment. I act embarrassed when I usher her in. Act like I’ve been meaning to put in some new furniture, a stand for the TV, maybe some modern art, but of course I’ve no intention of acquiring any of those things. She says she likes the place, that it’s not as bad as I made it out to be, but we both know the truth. I’ve planted the seeds of doubt in her mind. This is good. She has not come to visit since April, and I’ve since returned the sheets to my sister.

After about fifteen minutes I decide to squish Bertrand. He turns into… a tiny maraca, perhaps. Better if I didn’t get too attached. I rise and dress. I open my bathroom cabinet and take out the pills, rattle ‘em around in my hands a bit. Like a maraca! Feeling strangely rhythmic today. Without removing any from the bottle I replace them in the cabinet and stare into the mirror for another fifteen.

Juno and I have been dating for six months now. She’s a copywriter, freelance. To me this means she can stay in her apartment all day and still afford healthcare. She’s sexy, modern. The first white girl I’ve been with since Laurie. I think I might really love her, which means the end is near.

My heart is broken. Quite literally. I’ve stopped trying to explain my condition to people because of its inherent outlandishness. A rare form of cardiomyopathy in confluence with an enlarged member, has caused me to regularly faint without the stress hormones provided by a fractured core. It is an obligation to my health that I am perpetually in a state of emotional turmoil. Or there’re the pills. The ones I shook around earlier (I am now driving to work). I could just take the pills. The ones prescribed by my physician. I *used to* take the pills. The problem is that shilling out even a fraction of my net wages from data support analysis year after year to the pharmatech industry does not jive with my sought after lifestyle. Additionally, the pills make my pee smell funny.

Since becoming a real problem in my twenties, my condition has installed and continuously reinforced the notion that I was not meant to exist. I continue living in spite of this belief. To maintain the essential blood pressure, I’ve hidden mementos from my previous relationships around my home and office. Receipts, pictures, cut-outs of loving text messages. Most of them are from Laurie, my high-school sweetheart. Her silver scrunchie still occupies its own slot in my silverware drawer. I have the card she made me tucked under a compartment in my desk at work. She transcribed this Neruda poem and painted with watercolors the side of the road with the Dunkin’ Donuts where we first met. When I look at it I can release a small surge of anguish that lasts in tears for five or six seconds. Taxiing enough to get the job done, yet short enough to be manageable.

In my office I get a text message from Juno. She is reminding me of our dinner plans tonight at *Campo Azul*. In not so many words she says we need to talk.

*This is it,* I think. I hope she at least waits for the food to drop before she breaks things off. It is not often outside of these excursions that I go out to eat. After a despondent reply I jam my phone in between my seat and khakis, and scroll through finance reports for eight hours.

For months I’ve been planting the seeds for this moment. I may’ve been hoping it would’ve lasted longer, but I can only be in control over so much. One cannot be so sure about many things, but I am fairly confident in my comprehension of women. At the very least I know the general strides. The things that eat away at desire day-by-day. My mannerisms will be obnoxious, infuriating even, but I will take care to never let things boil over, because part of me does always want this to stick. Nothing is ever manufactured. Everything is me. I am all manners of behavior. Sometimes I need only *be* *me* slightly more than usual to make them realize that they actually cannot stand me, the walking contradiction.

At 5 PM I make a quick trip to the bathroom to look through my iphone’s camera roll: March-2011 to August-2012. My time with Charlotte. After a short cry, I gather up my papers and other belongings, and leave. Jason bumps into me on my way out.

“*Sorry Mike.”*

Brown hair. 6’1. Checkered tie. He knows my deal. Thought I was joking at first, but he must believe me now that I’ve rejected every one of his many pleas for friendship. Told him I can’t have friends. Friends were too emotionally gratifying. *I will literally fucking die if I get drinks with you, man, ok?”* I told him that the last time he asked. This was probably true. Eventually I’m sure it’ll happen (my death).

I believe I’ve truly loved every girlfriend in between Laurie and Juno (there have been four), but I understand that they were merely substitutes for the pills. Short bursts of dopamine before I’m launched headfirst into a shapeless mass of memory and sensation. Like the shots of tequila you take before you’re let out to dance in a nightclub. My lifestyle is not for the faint of heart *(Or rather it’s* exactly *for the faint of heart! No one ever said I couldn’t be humorous).*

In the car now. A blue BMW. Getting onto I-45 I put on my playlist with Fiona Apple and Eurythmics. Arohi’s playlist. I have to rotate the music I listen to every week so that it never loses its intended effect. Today it’s Arohi, starting on Monday we’ll switch to Kaytlen, then Charlotte, then Faye, and then we’ll circle back to Laurie. Haven’t spent enough time formulating a playlist for Juno. I know she likes Springsteen. Maybe tonight I’ll ask her more questions about that? *God. Shadowboxer always gets to me.* I pull over on the highway. Get out of the car. The clouds have thickened since the morning. Specks of precipitation have picked up in the pummeling wind, blowing south, against the rush of vehicles and the red sparks of my eyes. So many lanes. I could run across right now and start a pileup. Instead I just lean on my bumper. Pull out a lighter and a smoke to calm down. I try not to get *too* emotional while driving. Sometimes it can’t be helped. Oftentimes. As I inhale I watch the leaves, and the limp remains of other cigarettes bristling in the crackly rubble of the shoulder, wondering how many more of these could be mine.

It was after my mother died of a fungal infection that I found out the heartbreak could sub for the pills. I stopped taking them that week. I stopped doing anything for many weeks. Two months later, Laurie broke up with me in a dog park. She said I was too emotionally inept. That I didn’t understand her. That we didn’t argue enough. I tried explaining to her that I was still processing my grief. She said it’d started before that. I said I thought arguing was something people were supposed to avoid in good relationships, and she just blinked and looked at me as if I’d proven her point. I was 22 then. I haven’t felt a fainting spell since. Although, the trauma of losing my mother is not something that I conjure up when I need it. I don’t relive that. Never that.

Juno is already waiting for me at a booth when I arrive at the restaurant. The same bustling Mexican joint in Bay Colony that underwent three name changes with its three different owners, while still remaining essentially the same. Dim atmosphere. Football. Short Hispanic busboys with shiny hair who all look identical. A gringo paradise.

Neither of us bare our teeth when we smile at each other, as I slide into my side of the booth. Her strawberry blonde hair is long and straight today, with bangs folding over her forehead. The emerald green off-shoulder shirt she’s wearing reveals her strong collarbone, and displays a golden pendant. Has she gotten new glasses? I may be remiss to remark on those. She is beautiful. Unequivocally.

She tells me that she’s already ordered for the both of us (she knows my usual, and she probably asked the waiter in perfect Spanish she learned from her semester studying abroad in Spain, without even coming off wince-worthy for a white girl. God I really do love her). I tell her I was planning on trying something new, which isn’t completely untrue. She apologizes and tries to wave down the waiter, but I assure her it’s fine, and that I don’t mind taking an extra to-go box home with me tonight. She adjusts a string of follicles. I can imagine her finely polished toes curling in their sandals at my passive-aggression, her deftly toned thighs tensing and bouncing.

We talk about our days. Attempt to make the insipid minutiae seem like anything but. I admit I’ll miss the comforting rhythms we’ve settled into. *But that’s the point.* I must never forget. Then the waiter brings out our food and we eat in silence. Her salad, my tacos. My tacos are fat floury blankets of refried beans, steak, cheese and gravy, alongside handfuls of Spanish rice and guacamole. I briefly beam, then focus in. She woefully glances up at me for short spells when she believes I’m too preoccupied to notice her. I am, almost. I am very hungry. My stomach is conditioned to turn ravenous at the commencement of the white noise: couples chattering with each other and their children about school, work, summer vacation spots, life after solitude. These are families: men with other men, women with other women. One sonic blur singing the mundanities of everyday life. A lump of beans will tumble onto my fingers, a trace of salsa will fall onto my beard, and I will continue to consume with all the hunger of my heart. I suspect this annoys Juno.

She waits for the waiter to leave with the check before unloading her mind. It’s plain to see that she’s been thinking. Perhaps about our lost chemistry, whether or not she is making the right decision.

“Hey babe?” she says casually and reaches for my wrist. “Let me ask you something.”

I nod and say okay.

“Do you really like living in that grungy apartment?”

This is not the question I expected. *Grungy?* She’s never used that word before. I tell her I acknowledge it’s not the best place, but considering my circumstances it is the best place for me at this point in time*.* She asks me if I really believe that. If there isn’t another place I’d prefer to live at instead. It’s at this point that I realize she is asking me if I want to move in with her.

After our needless back-and-forth, when she ultimately does ask the question, I am at a loss. I try to generate some other feeling besides bafflement. Anger, fear, anything. Nothing. Shame, maybe. At my complete misreading of my partner’s feelings. *She is crazy,* my head tells me. *You’ve been dating for six months and she’s asking you to move in. She is empirically insane.*

In the end I decide to tell her the truth. I tell her all about my condition and my tokens of past relationships, the car rides, the crying, the maraca. I tell her that she was meant to join that league of lost loves, and that everything that you hate about me is crucially intentional. And not. The waiter brings back her card and she does not look up to say thank you. For a while she just looks at me. She looks away. Looks at me through slits again. I start to say some more words, and she interrupts me to call me a sociopath. She says she’s not saying that as an insult. That when she says *you need help,* that’s not an insult either.

“You can’t just make me not love you, Michael.”

She waits a few beats, glances around as if she’s looking for something. She removes herself from the table and leaves. It’s at this point that I realize I forgot to ask about her music interests.

*She’s crazy she’s crazy she’s crazy.*

The haze starts in before I even get home. I am lucky I don't crash into a lamppost or something. Something gnaws at my chest. Up the staircase my head turns to sludge. I trip and hit my jaw and ear. I hear teeth zip almost simultaneously with a piercing ringing. Loudening. *This shouldn’t be happening.* I should be devastated. I can’t imagine what’s going on with my heart today. Was Juno leaving disturbedly not a clear and definitive break up? At my door now. Under the harsh flash of the hallway lights, I struggle with my keys, and quickly try to replay my breakup with Faye. It was over Facetime. I remember being angry that she had not been brave enough to do it in person. Her face was red. She was sweaty, just having come back from the gym. Clearly I was already a stranger in her mind long before she murmured those words into her tinny phone speaker. *We need to break up.* It gnaws again. Inside. I knock over a trash can. There will be no way around this. I stumble to my bathroom and slam open the cabinet. Reach for the orange pill bottle and fumble with the cap. When I have it open I throw back a desperate gulp and let my head fall to the running faucet water.

*Drip*

*Drip*

*Drip*

*Rattle*

*I had set out to prove you right.* I can see that now.

My body is ninety degrees perpendicular with the bathroom door. Exhausted, but more or less returned to its normal state. I want to weep, but no tears accrue. My arms and legs are numb. Throat’s sore. My chest aches. The shards in my chest still ache. I did not see this before. I have become a pill bottle. I wanted to circumvent pain. I did not see the truth. *I* will never work. No matter how granular I become, the shards will still pound. I will continue to be the worst and the shards will still pound. *The shards will still pound, the shards will still pound.* They will continue sliding around in my hollow torso.

After some time I pick myself up and go to my dresser. From the top drawer I remove Laurie’s clothes (and Kaytlen’s, and Arohi’s) and take them to the kitchen. I dump them in the trash can. Finally, I leave again to retrieve the leftovers from the restaurant, still waiting in my car’s passenger seat.

For the next few days I will consider calling Laurie again. Tell her that I’ve never gotten over her, but that I’ve changed. I’m ready for her now. I will eventually try it, only to see that she has blocked me. Good. That will be for the best. I’ll continue taking the pills for a few days, and let the mementos go untouched. Go back to letting my shards ache again a few days later. I’ll alternate like this for a few months before I find someone new. Juno never texted back, so I guess it really was definitive. On a Tuesday in April I will send her a text message wishing her the best and saying that I never lied to her when I said “I love you.” That same day I will dispose of most of the mementos- most of them. Laurie’s poem card I will just move into the deep recesses of my godless freezer, nearly out of view, save for one poky corner. When the new girl comes over for the first time I’ll make sure she is ready. I’ll let her know about my sickness. And my other sickness. That I’m still trying to rebuild something. I know she will understand because she will be in my apartment (I’ll have asked if she wants to spend the night). She will see my newly hung picture frames, from a life long gone. The new TV stand. She’ll rest her feet on my new futon. And maybe when she’s hungry she’ll saunter over to the kitchen, leaving a hole under my arm. When she opens the freezer, she’ll accidentally find Laurie’s card inside, sitting under an unopened box of chocolate chip toaster waffles. She will pull it out, wipe the frost off and read the front. Then she will look across the room to me. And then we will see who remains.