

12:45AM, Sunday

Just one more drink. That's all you need Ez. You're drunk, and blacking out is not what you want to do tonight.

No more alienating friends. You don't know how much longer they are going to put up with it, and you don't like yourself when you get like this. This could be the main reason going out alone feels like a better choice for me at times. If I alienate a stranger, who cares, right? Just more faces in the crowd that most likely will not cross my path again. There's no reason people should be seen like this, as disposable. I'm not a sociopath, but I don't want to be hurt again. Everyone has feelings; everyone has a soul. I should care more about them.

It's difficult for me to account for that most of the time because I am selfish. I'm a narcissist. Which is worse, being one or knowing that you are one and not caring? It's not that I want to be this selfish, but I am, and I can't seem to stop. What should be a normal conversation leads me on a journey back to my

own needs and wants. I don't just want that to be done, I need it to be.

-What the fuck am I doing?

-What?

The bartender looks at me like I've lost my mind and there's a realization that I have said this out loud.

-Did you need something, he asks, subtly annoyed.

-Yeah, can I get a Redbull vodka, I ask.

He raises an eyebrow and pulls a glass from an unseen shelf behind the bar. The minutes have lost all urgency, and the multiple conversations are nothing but background noise in the spinning of my head. Some insipid comment makes me laugh to myself as my eyes follow the movements of the bartender, carefully judging the pour to make sure it meets my own requirements.

-Thanks, I say and strut back to my friends, who are each seated around a long table in the far corner of the restaurant.

My friend's voices have joined those of the strangers, no particular story standing out above another, so I sip my drink and smile. There's no reason to believe that they had the slightest idea that I'd left. It's in their nature, my nature, to not pay a lot of attention to what is going on elsewhere in a room. Occasionally, I throw in a nod to make them think I agree with whatever it is they're clamoring on about.

That's the general M.O. until the rolling blackout sets in, anyway. It's not healthy, but it's what it is, so yeah. The need for friends escapes me at the moment.

I'm that guy at the end of the night that you want to avoid like the plague because it's hard to tell what kind of a tangent I might get on. Drinking numbs the pain that for some reason my body insists on feeling. I have tried so much to get rid of it, replace it with nothingness, but for some reason it creeps back in and eats at me until there's no choice but to acknowledge it. Then I drink, and I drink a lot. And then drink more. It's common knowledge that this is not the best way to handle it, but I'm a cliché. Can't deny that. Everyone is, in one sense of the word or another.

-Where is Katie? I hear one of the girls ask.

-She's on the way, or so she says. Margaret answers the question pointedly, but she's right.

Margaret types something on her phone and puts it back in her coat pocket.

-Did she say how long, I ask?

-Ten minutes, but you know how she is!

-So an hour, I add loudly.

We all laugh. It's easy to pretend that I have always been one of them, but the truth is, it took a lot of acting. Taking cues from the way they look, talk, act, and the people that they

hang out with. It's not really that it's all a lie, but I have learned from the mess that was high school that if you don't fit in somewhere, life is going to be somewhat of a nightmare. It's preferential to have people that will have your back, even if you only see them once in a while.

Being me is not acceptable. I'm too weird, too—I dunno, but it's never enough. Maybe it's all in my mind; I've never been the one that anyone wanted or cared about. I'm the additional wheel; the third, fifth, twelfth. Here I am, though, feeling sorry for myself, yet standing tall next to them. There are times I feel that I can be alone, but it seems to actually be a struggle for me.

There's a chronic need for affection that looms just below the surface, and I need the attention to be solely on me. The warmth of another human, even just the proximity, can push away the sense of loneliness that can center on one's soul.

The conversation. Is it even really the conversation? I like it when they listen. If they could hear what I think, they would assume that there's a sort of madman in there. Not violent, but not someone with whom they would be happy to associate. I'm sure they already think that.

-Yes! I love this song! I shout and everyone looks.

My torso moves back and forth, my hand working adamantly to not spill my drink, but I'm unsuccessful. I put it down on the table and bounce up and down to the beat. I do have a little rhythm still leftover from teen dances far too many years past to recall each one with a numeral. Everyone laughs. It's the response I hope for, I guess. Pay attention, smile, let me know that you care.

It all feels so false, though. I do what I can, but in the end, I am not going to ever be the first thing on their minds. Is there a person somewhere that has been here, that can tell me it gets easier? Always being an afterthought. Of course there is someone. Where would the world be without the depressing songs about being alone? Oh, life, you are something.

Their friend at the end of the table is cute. She twists her hair around her finger and laughs, letting her whole body fall into small convulsions. No, don't think that. It's stupid. I'm definitely not the type of guy that she would pay any attention. There's been no indication of an attraction; she hasn't even looked this way. Her eyes inadvertently scan Nick's chest before she finds her gaze back on Margaret. Of course.

Why am I even thinking about this? It's supposed to be a good night. Shots. That's a good way to keep it going. Forget the worry; enjoy right now.

Katie approaches the table quickly, throwing her black purse over the back of the only empty seat. I grab her hand and say:

-You're late.

She presses her forehead against mine and smiles.

-I know, I couldn't get away from work, I had so much—, she starts.

-Let's get a drink; you need to catch up.

-Let me put my coat down.

Her dark hair bunches up around her head and neck as she hugs each member of the group. Yeah, just put down your coat. It's a few minutes before she finds her way back to me and says that she is ready for that drink.

-Let's do it then. My response is sarcastic but hopefully not noticeable.

I grab her soft hand and lead her to the bar.

-Two shots of tequila, I command loudly five steps before we actually touch the wooden top.

-Salt and lime, the bartender asks and smiles. He may have winked, but I could just be buzzed. In fact, that's the most likely scenario. It's nice to be noticed. No matter whom it is.

I look to Katie for her answer and watch the wrinkles appear on her forehead and her chin lift with her eyes as she nods slightly. Maybe it's too early in the evening, but what the hell. The answer:

-Yeah, please.

My gaze finds Katie quickly.

-How was work?

-It was good. The usual. How are you, love?

-Eh, you know!

She laughs and I reach for the two small glasses of clear liquid that have been placed in front of us. She gets the first before my hand grabs the second. I don't know why but I let the odor linger under my nose before the glass finds its way to my lips. This is generally not the best idea; any person that drinks knows this to be true. The receipt gets my signature before my hand grabs the yellow-tinted drink that I have had refilled to take back to the table.

-Babe, we need to get you a new drink. That was disgusting!

-That's ludicrous!

She laughs.

-I hate you so much!

-I know. I hate me, too!

Her kiss on my cheek feels warm, familiar, and loving; she then wraps her arm inside of mine like they are pieces of a puzzle.

I've completely fallen away from whatever they have been talking about at this point, but it's not something to which I care to put my thought tonight. This is the beginning of what I assume will become a mess. It's late and if we are going to get drunk, we gotta make this

happen now. My head is slowly fogging over, and I smile. The bottom of my glasses rises high into the air, a spectacle and sign that the drink is about to come to its conclusion and the show will begin shortly. I'm too old for this. I know that, but it's fun. It can be fun.

-What are you all doing on Thursday, Lindsay shouts down the table; a domino effect of silence falls over the table until it finally reaches me. She pulls at her low-cut top and repeats the question.

-Are you asking all of us, Melissa finally answers after a moment of confused, and continued, silence.

-Yes! She laughs.

-Why, what's going on?

-Well, I got this Groupon for ballroom dancing, and I thought you guys might want to try it with me?

The quiet calmness now becomes a fearful pit in the stomachs of each person at the table; scrunched faces do not hide the truth. I'm sure she can tell. She has to be able to tell if I can. I'm drunk, for fuck's sake.

-Come on, I think it's going to be fun!

-Umm, well, Nick started.

Thankfully, the waitress made her entrance, like she had realized what was about to happen to all of us and wanted to somehow save the day. Supergirl. Ha! I should tip her

more; she deserves it for ending this conversation. This would-be debacle.

-Is there anything else I can get for anyone, she inquired in a smoky voice twenty years the senior of her body and face.

-Yeah, could we get our checks, Nick chimes in as soon as the question ends.

-Oh, come on! Lindsay screams. Ez?

-I actually have to work late on Thursday, I stutter.

-You're lying.

-Okay, I don't want to go ballroom dancing.

-Really?

-Also, I'm poor.

-You came out tonight.

-This meal is the only one I'm getting this week. The group laughs, even Lindsay through her flippant, angry face. I'm not totally sure the touch of rage in her eyes was for show, though.

Our waitress is standing at a POS system in the opposite corner of our table slowly typing in each order. She stops, places the leather pads on the counter and pulls her hair into a loose bun. She continues poking in the numbers and returns ten minutes later with each check, separated. Her eyes and disheveled hair show annoyance, but her mouth paints a picture of joy. Joy to serve those around her and hopefully

the happiness of a large tip from a group our size.

I scan the check to see if a gratuity has already been added, which is standard for a group this size in many establishments. There is none, and I try to figure out 20 percent of the total. My brain is not functioning the way it should, only slightly because of my exhaustion, so I leave closer to 25 percent. It's much easier just to divide the total by four, even for a hazy brain.

Everyone is standing from the table to move toward the back room, the "club" part of the restaurant. I don't even think it's a part of the restaurant, just a shared door placed for whatever reason long before either business was conceived. The word Tanzen blurs my retina in neon just above the entrance. We enter, pushing through bodies; it seems early for this amount of excitement, but I haven't checked the time recently. There are no faces, just torsos and legs.

Our group stops at the end of another long, wooden surface and I push through the middle of them to lean against the wall. I love this song, and my body begins to move.

-You okay, Katie whispers into my ear.

The question barely lingers before it's gone and I watch the way the green and blue lights spin around on Melissa's blonde hair. She's sitting diagonal from me and takes a drink from a rocks glass. The drink doesn't look

familiar, but a pineapple rests over the lip of the cup. The light on her hair looks cool, like water, and then I realize it's probably just the alcohol that is making it appear so fascinating. Katie leans in closer and asks another question, one I feel like I am hearing wrong.

-Huh, I ask. My head almost hits here in surprise, but I need to be sure.

-You look cute tonight, she repeats.

-Uh, thanks.

She grabs my hand as my friends talk on in front of us. What are you doing, I ask.

-Just let it happen, she says, laughing.

-You're drunk.

-So are you.

-True.

-What are you two laughing about?

Lindsay yells near my face.

-Nothing, I say quietly, and I feel my hand begin to sweat.

-What? She bellows, as if more volume will make her slurring comprehensive.

-Nothing!

-Let's get a drink, she shouts and waves her half full glass in front of my face. She chugs the remainder of the amber liquid and her green eyes find mine. I can't help but laugh, shake my head, and move in front of her to lead her through the crowd.

My fingers slowly fall away from Lindsay's softer digits as Melissa moves into our path.

-Where are you going, she asks from a small divide between us and the door to the restaurant.

-Another drink.

-There's a bar right here, she points out, confused as to what is happening.

-We want it from that bar, I point to the one in the back of the room surrounded by people.

-That's stupid. Get it here.

-We don't—I trail off, and sigh heavily before continuing: We want to go over there where all the action is. No one is over here.

I stop moving towards the bar for a moment when I realize that Lindsay is talking to Ray. She pushes her hand through his gelled hair and he moves back quickly while she laughs. She kisses him on the cheek, loving, sweet. I miss that. At this point, I can't even remember the last time that I even wanted that with someone that has come into my life. That feeling of being in love or even just *liking* someone. I sound like I am in fifth grade now. *Like?* Wow, I really must be drunk. I'm telling the truth to myself.

-You ready? Lindsay asks.

-Yeah, let's go.

I can *almost* hear myself sigh as I use my shoulder to push through the crowd. It's tight, it's loud, it's a nightclub. We traverse the maze, bobbing my head to the music. Everyone is dancing, but they aren't listening to the words. They're sad. This person is dying inside while smiling. Always smiling. You can only drink and dance your pain away for so long before there's nothing left. Just memories and sadness. Shut up. Just shut up. We push into the miniscule spot between two stools and I speak immediately.

-Ginger ale and whiskey, and what do you want, I turn and ask Lindsay.

- Uh, hang on. Her eyes move intently back and forth across the illuminated bottles like she is reading the menu at a fast food restaurant.

Now, there's no coming down from this high. But, no there's no feeling alive—I need to remember these lyrics. Remember these lyrics; download it later. My phone reaches the bar top when I meet the glare of the bartender and turn once again to Lindsay.

-Hey, he's waiting. Do you know what you want?

- Just get me something sweet.

-Let me get a Kamikaze for her, I lean in and speak loudly as the song disappears into another.

The cologne he's wearing seems familiar but I can't place it. Someone I knew, or know,

wears the same scent. It's not important, but it digs at my memory. He stops and rolls his sleeves up, tight against his defined arms before adjusting the sweat band around his arm that holds the silver bottle opener.

Now there's no coming back down from this high. But there's no feeling alive.

Remember those lyrics. Search for them later. Get the song. I pull my wallet from my back pocket. It's harder these days than it used to be. Jeans are tighter and everything is a bit saggy. You're too old for this. You can't drink like this anymore. The drink is more bitter than sweet. Good, it's the way I like it. I hand Lindsay her drink just before handing my debit card, dinged and worn, to the bartender.

-Thanks, man.

-Yeah, no problem, he answers nonchalantly. It's barely above a whisper and I begin to wonder for a moment if I simply read his lips and the sound was all in my head.

We are just more faces in the crowd, another customer. A possible tip, a possible mess, but then it ends around 2:30. He won't remember most, if any, of the people that he served. It's a piece of intangible artwork, a Picasso. Features from one blending into another. It's all just finite. I can't help but laugh at myself. Might as well be a freshman in Art History, but then it's all gone from my head. All these words, these thoughts; sometimes it would

just be nice for them to all stop. Sleep. That's the medicine I need.

There's something about a face that stays with me long past an initial meeting, and I think I would do well as a bartender; it could be fun. My mind has a knack for grappling onto knowledge that I don't need and holding it far past a normal, expected expiration date. I can see a face a year later and remember something inane, such as the last four numbers of their phone number. This unusual trick has caused more than one side-glance over the years upon mentioning some random fact most would pretend they didn't know or remember.

He motions with the card across his neck and I nod. He turns back to the small black computer screen and pulls the plastic swiftly through the crevice to the left. The process is mechanized from many nights of the same. The nameless man hands the card back to me. Not really a man. He's too young for that but not a boy, either. Somewhere around twenty-five, maybe.

For a moment, there's a tinge of angst, or jealousy, that I'm no longer at the same point in my life. It hasn't been that many years since, but my body feels like it is starting to count down instead of up. This isn't something that's socially acceptable to question out loud at my age, as I'm sure anyone 10, or even 20, years

older than me would look at me like I am losing my mind.

There's no denying that the aches come swifter and stay longer now. Should have done more with my life. Some people my age are millionaires. Needless to say, I am not one of those success stories. Lindsay looks at me as I sigh deeply and smile.

-Thanks again, dude, he says as I take the leather-bound folder from him, discern an amount for the tip, and sign my name at the bottom of the long white paper. It's become even harder to decide what the actual tip should be due to my decreased capacity for addition, so I tip higher even higher than the previous bill. He seemed nice enough. I crumple the receipt; why are they so long anyway? Too much useless information at the bottom. Who reads it?

-Thanks for the drink, Lindsay yells.

-Dial back the volume there, crazy! I laugh; but really, she spit on me when she bellowed. The group could have heard her.

-Sorry! I think maybe I need to stop after this one!

-That's quitter talk, Linds. Do you want to be known as a quitter?

She trips and I catch her arm before her body can fall below the top of the bar. Only a few drops of the sunshine liquid spill from the glass she is carrying.

-You okay, I ask.

-Fine, but I definitely am not going to fall for your peer pressure now!

-Not sure what exactly you were “falling” for there.

She laughs and walks back to stand beside Ray. Her small arm looks like a child’s as she weaves it through his. The muscles in his back tense before realizing who it is that has invaded his space.

-Where have you been, Katie asks and puts her arm around my waist when I rejoin the group seconds after Lindsay.

-At the bar. I take a sip and continue: Feeling pretty good, aren’t you?

-Only a little. It’s Saturday! What else are we going to do?

-True.

-Or, we could be responsible adults who make a contribution to society instead of representing the delinquent half. But, nah. That sounds very tiring.

I take another long swig of my drink and let the warmth cuddle my heart before it falls like a rollercoaster to my gut. The heat settles here briefly and then it’s gone. Ah, that feels nice. The patio twenty feet away looks hazy through the lens of my glass covered in finger prints, presumably, and hopefully, my own. Small piles of snow remain but they are broken up by what would appear to be the brave, or stupid, people that cannot forego a cigarette for

the warmth of the bar. It's hard to believe that the temperature outside stands around 50 degrees currently. There is very little that I find myself able to focus on for more than a minute. There's a thought, then there's not. That rhymed. Ha!

It's difficult to distinguish any one voice from another and it's doubtful that the information currently buzzing around is something that I need anyway. There's a very good chance that I won't remember any of this tomorrow. The liquor is too far gone, barely, but too far gone; it's further than I'd planned, but here we are. No looking back, no stopping the dizzying feeling that precedes numb oblivion. Wow, that sounded dark. Just look towards tomorrow. Find that damn star and follow it until morning. Today? Another sip, more warmth.

Melissa's head finds its way to my shoulder, and the warmth from it feels pleasant, but slight. I ask if she's okay and she nods slowly, her hair getting caught against the fabric of my peacoat. Do you want to go sit down, I continue. She nods again. I slowly place my hand at the small of her back and help her lean against the wall before letting her know that we will be moving in a minute. I pull my hand from her body, slowly, and turn to the rest of the group.

-Guys, let's move to that empty booth over there. I don't think Melissa is doing very well.

Melissa is the decision-maker for the group and the fact that she has gotten this drunk is out of the norm. She's usually in control of herself among others.

-Something wrong tonight, Mel, I ask.

-No, I'm fine. Just trying to have a good time for once.

For once?

The position of group lead was self-appointed, but everyone goes along with it. It's not fun all the time, but she's a good person. Her tastes just differ from my own. She thrives on going to the smallest, most expensive places that she can find. Venues with no free parking and walking distances that seem in the mile range. The ones that are trendy for a short time before ultimately shutting down once the fascination passes.

Me? There needs to be room to spread out, to enjoy myself. Too many people make me nervous. Maybe, that's why I drink so much. No, I can't really explain that away. I just love the feeling of being able to lose myself for a little bit.

Lindsay looks around, gauging what the response of the group will be if we shift positions, I assume. She likes to think that she is in charge, but she doesn't like to make an

enemy of the rest of the group. It's a fine line to walk, like choosing to marry Henry VIII. Ha! That's the type of joke that has me labeled as weird; too literate, too something. One of many little eccentricities that leave me utterly forgettable amongst those who couldn't care less about English history. It's a fine line that I walk; somewhere between educated and common. Not to say these people are common, but—I dunno.

I won't be forgotten, I can't be.

Why does that matter so much?

Who the hell knows?

Is it so wrong to want to leave something behind that people will remember, something worthy? I don't know what constitutes as worthy, but worthy of someone who matters. It's weird, this need to explain to myself what I feel remembered even means. If I can't be thought of here and now, then maybe in the future. Stupid, I know. I won't be around to see it, but it makes me feel better. I'm not scared of not being here; I'm not scared of death.

That's what I keep telling myself, anyway.

Burn out if that's what you need; the audience loves a good self-destruction.

Maybe I *am* scared. Either way, when it's over, it's over. If there is something left behind, something beautiful, something brilliant, then maybe those who knew of my

flaws could forget them. And those who didn't know the truth, would just remember the greatness. It's a degree of what I call the Saint syndrome. People tend to forget the negative qualities of someone they have lost.

It's easy to remember the good, to recollect what you knew from the outside. The truth behind the matter; the flaws, shown to only those near the deceased, are gone. I want to go a step further and leave something that even strangers know as wonderful.

-Yeah, that's fine, Lindsay finally answers, monitoring the looks of our group to make sure that everyone wants to sit.

The decision should have been immediate; the well-being of our friend should come first, before Lindsay's popularity. It's getting late and the concern for how the night is going is one that should be diminished if not altogether gone.

-Come on, Mel, let's go over there and sit down.

-Ok, she mumbles, or slurs. Both.

I nod my head in the direction of the empty booth as she swings her arm around my neck. It feels nice to be needed, even if only in less-than-ideal circumstances. Mel reaches for her drink but Lindsay grabs it first.

-Let me carry that for you, girl, she pipes in and leads the way.

Melissa falls into the booth harder than intended and I mutter an apology that I'm sure she doesn't hear or understand. She immediately reaches for the drink that Lindsay plops on the table as the back of my hand brushes the sweat from my forehead. I'm not sweating profusely but enough that I notice. Does anyone else?

Another drink is in order. The path to the bar seems more difficult in light of the sobriety that seems to be reigniting within my body. The trips for new drinks are innumerable at this point, but it's comforting to see the same face each time. No one knows why I've walked away, if they notice at all. There is no importance in this knowledge and the night will go on with or without my presence.

Damn, it's only 12:45. The time is dragging. My phone must be broken, or behind. When is the time change? We've been here forever. Less than an hour actually. The fun has already subsided. I look back to the table and everyone is laughing.

Not Melissa.

She must have pre-gamed before they picked her up. I'm sure they all did. Part of me is glad that I had to work late; it kept me from ending up like her. That's the state that I would be in if I had gone. That's how the night will end.

The night doesn't have to go that route.
It will.

How else do you end up with a good story? This logic is fucked up, and I know that. In my fantasy world it's easy to pretend that I don't have a problem. Maybe I don't, could just be severe depression. I don't start the day with a beer. Hmm? Mel's state continues to level out my own drunkenness.

Drink. Just keep drinking and have a good time. She'll be fine. We always are.

I don't drink every day, just social events and such. Isn't that what they all say? That's cliché number one in AA.

Think about everyone around you; they don't want to see you obliterated.

They did at one time.

I don't think about my friends enough when we go out, or maybe I do? Too much? My process is to analyze every single angle; what do they want from me? I want to know how it is they are going to hurt me before they do it. They're always going to hurt me. I know that. It's just best to know beforehand, to prepare.

-What can I get for you?

The bartender's eyes seem brighter. Probably just the stupor I'm working towards. Crystal blue. Lines form at the edge of his eyes and his shoulders fall. The names of the liquors are running together. Just tell him what you want. You know exactly what you're going to order, Ezra.

-Whiskey, I mutter. Jameson.

-Any mixer?

-No.

-On the rocks?

-Sure.

Show him that you're a badass. No mixer, no chaser. He doesn't care one way or another as long as I don't cause a scene. Friendlier demeanor means better tip. Don't let him think you're a pussy. Man up and be cool. This moment is the only thing that matters right now. Live in it. He may have said cool but the response was quick, too quick to decipher. He turns and grabs the green bottle behind him and fills the glass of ice; I didn't even see him add the cubes.

-You have a tab?

You know I don't.

My leather wallet poses only minimal issues in its retrieval from the back pocket, and I slip the card into his hand.

-Start one, please, I say and take the drink from the freshly wiped bar.

My disappearance from the group seems to have had very little effect on them. I take a long drink and decide that the next drink should be a double, maybe a triple.

No, that's a terrible idea.

That's how you get cut off real quick. The drinks are fading fast, and so is my sense of caring. How do I get the fun back? Trouble builds when dwelling on my position as the

third wheel. There's no use to give it a number anymore. I've been them all. Third, fifth, thirteenth.

Melissa seems to have rebounded in the short span of time that found me absent from her side. I don't know how she did it but now there are smiles and full words where before there had been slurs and tears.

-What happened there, I ask Lindsay, pointing.

-I have no idea. We got her water and she bounced back.

Lindsay reaches for my drink and asks what's in it. She pulls the beverage beneath her nostrils and they flare.

-No, thank you! I dunno how you drink that stuff.

-It's good! It's classy, I say laughing. I go further: I'm old now, and this is what old farts drink.

-Yeah, okay, but keep it over there. I don't want to smell it. It's going to make me puke.

-Oh, it won't be around for too long. Besides, it doesn't even smell that strong.

Another gulp and the liquid is gone. The glass practically falls onto the table with a clank.

-Be right back, looks like I need another.

-You sure about that?

-Worried about me?

-You know I am, she says and kisses my
cheek.

-Thanks, but I'm fine.

-You always say that.

-And I always mean it.

-You know I'm here if you need to talk,
right?

-I'm fine. Do you think Mel is okay?

-What do you mean?

-She's not herself.

-She's just having a good time.

-She didn't say anything?

-No, she's fine.

-Okay, I sigh. I'm getting another drink.

You want one?

Lindsay's shoulders drop and she nods.