

**4:48AM, Monday**

*Save yourself.*

Save yourself. I don't think that you are going to be able to save me.

If that sounds a little too dramatic for you, then maybe it's time for you to walk away. This isn't going to be something that you want to hear. I'm used to it, and at times probably play the victim too often, but only in terms of the life I live within. I'll survive. Or maybe not. There's been a lot of drama in my life—no, in my head lately. It's probably of my own doing, at least some of it. Most of it. I tend to think of my life as a movie. There's no denying that. It's hard to turn the thoughts off. Too many—too few. It's always wrong in someone else's eyes. My eyes.

I look to my right to see that I am alone. There's no reason to check the left. It's going to be the same story. Who am I even talking to? Some invisible, made up audience that hangs on every word coming from my mouth? I wish I could say that that is the first time, but I always wanted to be famous. Famous for anything really. It's stupid, unrealistic, a dream as farfetched as traveling to Pluto.

-It's always gonna be a planet to me, I say aloud. Ha!

Just another millennial who thinks they have what it takes to make it big in big Hollywood. Or New York. Hollywood seems so antiquated now. Ha! Antiquated? Look at me using big words to impress an imaginary group of people that probably don't care, either.

-The water looks so black tonight, don't you think? I ponder.

-We really shouldn't be here, you know?

-What does it matter? I lean my head over and listen to the sound of liquid hitting stone. Some of it reaches my cheek, but only a little.

It won't matter in the morning.

-Think I can jump down to that rock there?

A long, flat surface stands somewhat below the one on which I currently find myself. Ten feet? Maybe eight.

-What do you think? One last performance? My body begins to shake. First, and last.

If I can't be the star, maybe I can at least be the sideshow. People enjoy the sideshow, right? They don't come to see them, but they do take pleasure in them. That's what I could be! A sideshow oddity.

Somehow, that doesn't help. It doesn't make me feel better. In fact, there's little comfort in the thought of being a freak. Yet, I feel I have taken on the title.

-Why am I so damn dramatic?

Asinine; it's so fucking asinine. This headspace is nothing more than one over-the-top tragedy after the next. I suppose I should have been Greek. Ha! That's not even funny, but I can't stop laughing tonight. Some people would think that's sick, but my sense of humor has also teetered on the side of gallows.

The cool air surrounds and picks up speed and—Oomph. Okay, that jump was a little higher than I thought.

-Damn it, that hurt!

I rub my ankle and my own howls echo back and forth in the canyon. Who knows whether it's from the pain or the sheer ridiculousness of the situation. What is going on with me tonight? Stupid body. Maybe this is the best decision. I don't know how my body will feel in 20 years if it's giving up already. The shirt tourniquet around my hand begins to loosen and I pull it tight once again. I can't even feel the pain anymore.

-You gave up on me earlier than I expected, body.

Apparently, I feel the need to reiterate this and continue: I can't blame you, though. I haven't exactly been that easy on you over the years. What's some more pain? It's almost over, right?

Am I playing 20 questions with myself? No one else here to ask, I suppose. I just need to hear the words aloud. Make sure that I have made the right decision. It hurts to pull off my boat shoe, but the cold water feels good on my foot. Was that a leaf? Or gross, a fish? Why was that so funny to me?

-So what do you want to talk about? It's been awhile since we've talked, AJ. What have you been up to all these years? Did you move on to some other guy that needed you more? I guess I moved on first, didn't I?

-You'll sink like a rock when you hit the water, he offers up while making a circle in the water with his hand.

-You're an asshole, you know that? I'm not sure if I've ever realized that before.

-I'm just trying to make simple conversation. It's best that you know it's not going to be the immediate peace that you are hoping it's going to be.

-Yeah, I know.

-And if you go to Hell?

I don't answer. My hands begin to tingle and my stomach drops.

-You didn't want to hear it out loud? Isn't that why you are talking to me? You want to run all this by me?

-It pisses me off that you know my thoughts.

-Okay.

-Fuck you, dude!

His chuckle annoys me; I close my eyes and he's gone.

I run my hand through the water. It's cool, refreshing. There's a sense that I'm actually alive. I'm not part of the Matrix. I have always had a weird fascination with water. I guess it's fitting this is how I would want to go. My heart beats heavier against my insides; my chest is tightening, my fingers numb.

-Don't think too much about it. You won't do it if you think it through. You're not strong enough.

Strong enough? It's a move of cowardice in general public opinion. That's what I thought for a long time, but I've never been to this point before. I've never felt like I was losing control of my own mind or my own emotions. There's no peace in being awake. There's no freedom that comes with age. Just a larger cage made of paper requiring everything I've ever earned.

The pain doesn't stop. High school repeats itself over and over under pseudonyms like office politics. Invisible knives constantly find themselves sticking from my back. Little things build into more than they should and eventually you just want out.

-I just want out.

I wonder if anyone will come to the service. Even now, my vanity finds its way through to the surface. Is it so wrong to wonder if people actually care? They usually don't when it comes to those currently in their lives. I'm guilty of it, too. Maybe, I should leave something about what I want. Maybe I should just tell my mom not to do anything. It would save her money. The best thing that can happen is if they can't find the body.

-Body.

Saying it out loud doesn't have the effect that I thought it might. Still, there's no realness to the word. My chest begins to tighten again. Not sure if it ever unfurled from the first bout of anxiety upon arrival at this spot.

-Stop.

Stop thinking about it. You have to be stronger than this at least. Be stronger than yourself. Don't be a coward and disappoint your entire life. It's almost over, so just be brave about it. Let them know you did it on your own terms.

They'll be sad. They'll talk. There will always be talk; that never ceases to be true. They'll say horrible things. Will they wonder about the times that they abandoned me? Will they wonder about the times that they blew me off? Or the times I blew them off. Look at me, feeling sorry for myself again.

-Climb off the burn pile, Joan of Arc, you're no martyr.

Maybe I deserve to be blown off, to be ignored? I play the victim all the time. You can't go through life doing that; people will start to blame you. They will start to hate you. Resent you for letting it happen over and over again.

-Stop laughing! It's not that funny, AJ! Why do I even talk to you? Do you think I'm a monster?

There I go, again, apologizing for my feelings. I shouldn't have to apologize for how I'm feeling, for being the person that I am. I don't remember the last time that I felt something for someone else, though. My empathy hit a wall years ago, but I don't think there's really one moment that could be pinpointed for the end of that era.

Another person, I mean. Animals, that's where my heart lies. They need me. They need someone in their corner because the world is such an awful place. People think that it's okay to throw them away. It's not.

-What is your problem? Go away. I have my own thoughts in my head, and I don't need yours. Get away from me! I won't let another person do this to me, let alone someone like you! I'm already done! Just stop, just leave me alone! AJ, get the fuck out of here. I don't need your friendship anymore!

-You're overreacting. And—you might be losing your mind.

-You don't think I know that? Go.

I feel myself falling backwards but I have no way to stop it. The base of my neck collides against a surface with no give and the pain is immediate, however numbed by the liquor. My head aches, but only for a moment. I pick up the bottle and pull it to my lips. The liquid spills over the lower part of my face as I try to find my mouth. It doesn't taste good, but the warmth in my chest makes up for the brief, unsavory taste. Only a matter of time now. Is this something that needs to be dramatic, or is it something that I should just do and be done? I suppose the whole act is dramatic.

There I go again. Drama. I'm so stupid. Just so damn stupid. There doesn't need to be drama. I'm sure that is what ruined most of the friendships that I had, the need to be the center of attention. It happened even when I didn't understand it myself. I used to be the life of the party, the crazy one that everyone wanted to be around. They wanted to spend time with me, but as we age, that goes away. It turns into a problem that no one really understands. Hell, I don't even understand it fully. I just know that

sometimes you have to fight your demons, even if you know they are going to win.

What is it they say about the brightest star burning out faster? Does the star even know that is the risk of putting itself in that position?

This time, they've won. I know that I've come to the point that I can't go on doing the same old thing. I can't make it work. I've tried over and over again. I've prayed, I've hoped; I've made comments about it. No one cares. They tell me it's not funny.

I never meant it to be. There was some part of me that needed the help, needed someone to step in and understand, to tell me that it's not okay. No one stepped in, made a plea. So, here we are. I am finally making the ultimate decision that this has to stop. I have to stop. I have no more will power to pretend that I'm going to be alright.

-I'm never going to be alright.

I've made my decision; if I hadn't already, I should say. I love so many people, but they never loved me. This could completely be on me, I recognize. I was always the option they had if nothing better came along. I'm tired of being an option.

Is it too much to want someone to care for me? For me, not for someone that I pretended to be. Pretending to be someone that you never were takes its toll on the mind. Eventually, you're not even sure who you are, or were, and everything is one big damn mess. Who cares, really? If they really thought about me, even for one brief moment, would I have made



it this far? To the point where I can say goodbye so easily. There's no use trying to be strong any longer; it seems it has mostly been in vain.

-My loneliness is killing me, I laugh.

You can only deal with being told that you are not good enough for so long. Eventually, that is the mentality that you understand, that you live with. It's a mentality that overtakes and becomes who you are.

-Hey man, you okay?

-AJ?

-Uh, no.

I turn around, squinting to find a face for the voice but can only see a small orange glow in the darkness.

-What's so funny?

His voice sounds vaguely West Coast, slightly nasal, a lot *bro*.

-What do you mean, I ask.

-You were laughing. Kinda loud, dude. What's so funny? Let me in on the joke.

-Sorry if I bothered you.

-You didn't. Now, what the fuck were you laughing at?

-Whoa.

-Sorry, I meant that to be funny. You don't know me, though. Probably shouldn't come off harsh to someone I just met in the middle of the night. Morning? I'm so fucking high. Now come on, what made you laugh so hard?

-It's weird, I have no idea. I don't even remember.

-Are you high, too?

-No, drunk.

He laughed. The sound of this put me at ease. I'm totally high, he announced. Mind if I sit down, he continued.

-Nah, go for it.

-I'm Matt.

-Ezra.

-Never actually met an Ezra before. Nice to meet you.

He holds out his hand, and I take it quickly. It was light and quick. He lay back on the rock and I start to make out a few facial features. Well, what I assume is a beard or a weirdly misshapen jaw. I can't imagine he would have a broken jaw and be outside wandering around tonight, though. Or, that could be exactly the type of person that wanders around in the woods in the middle of the night.

-What are you doing out here, he asks.

-Just thinking—and drinking. The water is peaceful.

-Are you out here alone?

-Why? Thinking of robbing me, I say with a smile that I cannot lose.

-You caught me, sir. I can barely stand, but I will definitely be robbing you.

-Considering how drunk I am, I'm sure it would be pretty equal and a real shitshow. But no, it's just me. You?

I realize that I probably should have lied to him. I don't really want to end up beaten and—dead.

There's a ridiculousness in that way of thinking in this situation that brings on another roar.

-Dude, either stop laughing or let me in on the joke! It's driving me crazy!

-Nothing, just the beer talking, or thinking. I'm not even making sense to myself tonight. What brings you out here?

-Just in, rafting and camping for the weekend with some buddies of mine. We saw it was going to be warm and decided to take advantage of it.

-Where are they?

-Passed out. Too much to drink for them, too. See the fire over there?

I assume that he is pointing through the trees, but I can't be sure. There's a soft glow that might be a fire, but I can't really say for sure. Could just be the power of persuasion. My eyes have become glazed, and the exhaustion set in hours ago. I feel like my eyes should have adjusted to the night by now, but the clouds continue to cover and uncover the moon in frequent patterns, making it far more difficult to decipher anything fully. It's not something I would have ever noted had its existence not been pointed out.

-Yeah, I mutter.

Agreeing is the easiest thing to do right now; I don't have the energy for him to keep trying to point out something that really doesn't matter, anyway.

-Where are you from, I ask.

-Texas.

Damn, I think. I was wrong.

-But I grew up in California, he continues.  
Southern Cali.

I was right. I like being right. Who doesn't?

-What about you, sir?

-It doesn't matter. The Midwest is pretty  
much all the same.

-You out here for vacation?

-Nah, moved here a few years ago.

-That's awesome! I've been here the last few  
weeks hanging out, but I've thought about moving.  
It's so beautiful. Almost supernatural. Ya know?

The full intoxication has taken over his voice,  
a losing battle against the sound of the falling water.  
I should not have assumed that it was a cigarette. Not  
here, in the middle of the night. It's kind of a known  
hippie spot. The distinct smell should have tipped me  
off, but my good friend, whiskey, has reduced my  
senses to superficial at best.

-That sounded really douchey, didn't it, he  
asks me, and for once, I can see his eyes glimmer in  
the moonlight.

-No, I know what you're talking about.

Again, I don't want to argue or extend the  
conversation. Too tired; too wasted.

-This may just be the weed, dude, but you  
seem like a pretty cool guy.

-Thanks, man.

-It's true! You are probably a pretty awesome  
human being, he mumbles while failing to sit upright.

-You don't have to say that.

I start laughing again.

-Another joke? He asks.

-No, you. Why would you worry about my opinion? I'm a random guy you met laying on a rock in the middle of the night. I think that you can guess that I'm not a pillar of the community.

-True.

Matt starts with a low chuckle before he loses his cool completely.

-We're a pair, aren't we? He poses.

-What do you mean?

-Two randos in the middle of the night, drunk and one of us very, very high. We have barely discussed anything, but I am ready to Facebook friend you. And, as you know, that is the biggest of deals.

I snicker and his teeth now come into view, white, like his eyes. No brighter. The eyes are dulled by the weed. Tonight's not a great representation for them, although there is really no reason that I should care. He looks young, probably early twenties once the full picture has come together.

-Yes, yes it is, I quip.

He slaps my shoulder. How can someone that I don't even know make me feel like maybe someone in this world does care about me? That's stupid. I'm too easy. Possibly an optimist. Don't let that get out to people. I want to believe that people care about me. Even strangers. Don't second guess yourself now, Ez. He's high and you won't ever see him again. You may not see anyone again.

-Fuck, there's no cell service out here, he yells and laughs.

-I think that's probably a good thing for camping. Ya know? People like to get away. Be alone.

-Yeah, true. I have never been like that, though. I'm better when I have an audience, when people are around to talk to. Solitude is not my forte, dude.

-I used to think it was mine, but there are days now that I'm not so sure. An audience can be nice, but in the end, do they really care?

-Wow, this just got serious.

-Sorry, didn't mean to put that out there so bluntly.

-I'm kidding, it's fine. No worries, man. Want a hit off this?

I can see the white paper in front of my face and think for a moment before I take it between my fingers. The smell encompasses any sobriety that might be left floating in my head. Thanks, man, I say.

-No problem. Let's have a good night, sir. I'm wide awake, and I'm guessing you are, too.

-Ya know, I have absolutely no idea what time it is. Might be morning.

-Oh, that's a fact.

-I would probably be getting up for work then.

-You off today?

-No.

-Ah.

A languid tightness has found its way from my body into some other form for which I cannot explain, but it's no longer with me. Is this God? Did

he send this crazy hippie out here to keep me distracted until I could think clearly? This high off of his ass stranger? I laugh at the irony at this supposition, but God does work in mysterious ways as everyone puts it.

I am thinking clearly.

Is he supposed to make me feel better about the decision that I've made or change my mind? Why has life become so difficult? I'm a damn mess and I just can't seem to make it work out. Why is my head so fucked up? I just want everything to work out for once.

It does work out. You don't appreciate it like you should.

Is that so much to ask? Is it me; is it the world?

Josh.

Don't.

-Where'd you go, dude?

-Huh? Just thinking, sorry. It's been a long night.

-I kinda picked up on that, he laughs.

My hand brushes over the rough surface intermittently confirming many misses of the bottle I seek. Finally, the smooth glass is found and I breathe out heavily. I can't even really taste it anymore.

-Can I get some of that?

-Sure.

I hand him the bottle and listen as he gulps loudly. Normally that would annoy me, but my body has found its way into some weird state of nirvana.

I'm no expert on the subject, but a drug and alcohol induced nirvana is nothing like the actual meaning.

Is there such a thing as bro at first sight? Ha! Matt's breathing is slow, but steady, and it's nice to have someone here. No words, just here.

-Well, that goes down pretty easily, doesn't it? Matt says aloud after several minutes of silence.

-It's the good stuff; decided not to skimp tonight.

My voice sounds deeper, cooler, unrecognizable. Sleep had nearly taken hold for the night before he had chimed in and brought the force of reality back.

-Hell yeah, it is!

-Haven't even felt the need to vom! This was louder than intended, but I'm sure Matt couldn't tell the difference.

-Well—that's good then.

I hear him gulp down more.

-Slow down there, killer, I say.

Killer? I have never in my life used that phrase, but it definitely came out of my mouth.

He laughs.

-Sorry, just so good. So. Good.

-I think we already established that, bro.

-Smart ass.

I reach over and grab the bottle from him, almost violently. The heat from Matt's fingers finds its way up my arm and into my chest. The invigorating burn from another gulp meets the heat in my chest and works its way into my stomach. How long do you think it takes to get from my mouth to



my stomach? Should I grab my phone and time the sensation? Nah, too tired. Also, that might be the stupidest thought I've ever had. A small chuckle passes through my lips but quickly dissipates.

There are few spots on the rock that the bottle can sit comfortably without falling. The realization that I have had too much should have occurred earlier in the evening, but the pull at my tear ducts that I might not have any more is the final straw. My judgement on time is off, but the length of time I hold onto the bottle to avoid disaster is prolonged and unnecessary. I could finish it. Should I do that? Would that be rude? I don't know him and it's mine, so I guess it really doesn't matter. What if he beats the shit out of me? It would save me some trouble, I guess.

I move my arm slowly, letting my fingers meet his. He pulls away. The pull seems to be more of a surprise than one of disdain. It was quick, not cold, not unfeeling.

-What are you doing?

-I'm so sorry, dude. This shit has me all out of it tonight. Really, I'm sorry. I'm truly a fucking moron.

-No, it's fine.

He takes another drag of his joint and continues: are you okay?

-Honestly?

-Yeah.

-No.

He grabs the back of my neck.

Fuck, he is going to beat the shit out of me.  
Matt places his other hand and my own on his chest.

-It's going to be okay, Ezra whatever your  
last name is. It is.