

Baker California

Larissa left the next day for home and I pulled an all-nighter, went to the scheduling meeting for my job, told everyone I knew that I had sex with her, and crashed.

The beginning of winter break was not exceptional. I worked, talked to Larissa on the phone; standard fare; though Justin, Robbie, Shawn and I were planning a trip to San Francisco later during break. We planned to crash overnight in Las Vegas on the way there, so Larissa and I were going to meet in Vegas, at which time she promised to show me her new tattoo and a recent purchase of lingerie. Damn. What a woman.

I worked the night before the trip, the overnight, the grave. I got off about 7:00am and crashed. I awoke about 4pm because Justin said we needed weed for the trip. I didn't disagree, called my friend and picked up a sack. Next, pack.

I spent quite a bit of time gluing a glass bowl, a slide, into a bicycle water bottle. Justin and I christened it, "Trippy, the Travel Bong." It was 2:00am before we were completely ready.

We were supposed to leave first thing tomorrow. I couldn't sleep anyway. So I cleaned the weed and packed it into an Altoids tin. Still early. Starting to get tired. No bother. Make some coffee.

Shawn showed up at 6:00AM with his girlfriend, Rebecca. She wasn't invited. We had the space, just, like, that changes the whole dynamic. I couldn't really say that then, though, so I drank some more coffee.

We woke Justin and Robbie, got on the road about 8AM.

Though I wasn't born on the road, I am home there. I can't honestly remember any of the drive. I got very little sleep, perhaps none. Yet somehow we arrived in Las Vegas, Nevada about 4pm.

I dropped off Justin at Caesar's Palace. I was supposed to meet Larissa at the Hard Rock Casino. The strip in Vegas is impossible to navigate. I was going to be late, but this was before cell phones. I ached while traffic failed to move. An hour later I finally arrived.

The Hard Rock, at least at the time, was a circular casino. I circled. I circled again. The vast store of energy at seeing my love began to vanish. Once again, around I went. Three times. I had conspicuously stared at half the clientele. She wasn't here.

Exhausted. Dejected. Lost. Then I did perhaps the coolest thing I've ever done. I walked to the bar, ordered a double Crown Royal, slammed it, paid the man and left.

I've never been one for drinking and driving. I've only done it twice that I can remember. Clearly, at this point, I wasn't drunk. But I sure as hell felt it. Plus the sleep dep. Plus the traffic. Plus the melancholy. I was awed I made it.

I found the rest of the crew. They were hot to check out the underground mall. I wanted, powerfully, to shoot myself. I followed, though, not wanting be a burden to their glee. How I thought I wouldn't be a burden, as depressed as I had ever been to that point, I do not know.

We ate at Caesar's Palace's buffet. I couldn't taste anything because, all this while, I had been drinking anything I could get my hands on. It is not hard to get one's hands on booze in Vegas. I wrote on the back of my table mat, "a \$15 place mat." I have it to this very day, to always have available something to remind me of the pain.

I was quite drunk but somehow Shawn got me to my room. There, I called Larissa. Her parents told me that she had broken down in Baker, California. I asked them to ask her to call me. "Sure." Even drunk I could tell they had no idea who I was.

She did call. She set my mind at ease. All I can remember of that call was how warm my love was for her. The tragedy appeared to have been averted. No reason anymore to die. She still loves me. She said so. Drink more beer.

So I drank and passed out. In all, I have almost no memory of Las Vegas, NV, only that reported here.

San Francisco is my favorite place in the entire universe, that I have been. After driving the boring part of Cali, you get to the hilly, windmill-covered green. The Bay Bridge brings with it a cool breeze. It is as hell coming into bliss, dirt to the sea. Driving in San Francisco, on the other hand, is about as painful as driving can get, especially in a standard.

Triumphant through yet another driving ordeal, we got our lodgings; the youth hostel at Fisherman's Wharf. I was a middle class kid. I didn't think I could handle this place. I complained, maybe even cried a bit. Back then, I was a dork.

The first night, Shawn and Rebecca took me to the City Lights coffee shop and bookstore. I'd never heard of it. We got drunk in a local bar. They were going to get a local hotel room and fuck. Needless to say, I wasn't invited, so they sent me off, on my own, to walk back home; nearly 6 miles through a town I didn't know. How exciting!

It really is amazing how many treacherous journeys were undertaken on this trip with no deleterious events occurring. I made it back. The night watchmen at the hostel wasn't thrilled to have to let me in, drunk, at 2 in the morning, though he did. I slept.

The next day, I planned to go to the Haight. No one else wanted to join me, so I went alone. I parked my car on Haight street and rolled two J's, then walked down to Golden Gate Park, stopping in shops along the way. Golden Gate park is pretty dope.

While walking back up Haight, a homeless kid asked me, "Can you fix this?", referring to a brand new honey-bear bong. I knew what he meant, and actually could fix it, so we walked off to a spot he knew. Then I pulled out my weed.

"This is fucking red-bud."

"Red-bud? Schwag?"

"Red bud. West Coast, we call it red bud. Here, we'll smoke mine."

Under a tree, a block off Haight, we christened his brand-new honey-bear bong and we chatted about all the famous people he'd met. He had some really good shit, or I'd be able to tell you all about it. Once again, I made it back ok.

I called Larissa. She was down. She didn't feel like talking. That made me down. But what could I do? Justin, Robbie, Shawn, and Rebecca were going to go to a bar. I couldn't afford it. The entire trip, I couldn't afford anything. Vegas had tapped me, and I hadn't pulled a slot.

What to do when poor in San Francisco California. The answer to that question is that there may be no better place in North America to be poor. I didn't know that, though, and wanted to be alone anyway, so I sat in my car smoking "red bud."

A few car down, in the row facing me, was a VW bus. I watched as two guys got in. A few minutes later, I heard coughing. Fuckin' Cheech and Chong.

I was not completely myself during this trip, looking back. Some other man. I did a number of things I would never have done, now, back then, or even conceivably. I'm not completely sure how I did any of them. A special time.

I walked up to the bus.

"Hey, um, hey, I couldn't help but notice that you seem to be smoking."

The door opened.

"Uh, yeah. Cigarettes. You're here to bum a cigarette?"

"Uh, no. I just have some not-cigarettes and was wondering...maybe I got this all wrong."

"You've got some smoke?"

"Yeah. It seemed like you..."

"We just got done, but if you wanna smoke your shit...you down, Harry?"

Harry said yes. And then I pulled out my weed. I should have remembered from earlier.

"Fucking red bud? Here, we'll smoke some of ours."

We got baked and talked about following The Dead before Jerry died and how cool Phish was. Two really cool hippy dudes. I don't think either was called, "Harry", but, again, they had some really good shit.

I decided to call Larissa, because calling her stoned sounded like a good idea.

That payphone in front of the youth hostel. Not the one on the end, the one near the center. It's probably not there anymore, with cell phones. Unfortunate, because I always planned, if I ever get famous, to buy it and turn it into some type of monument.

I called my love. She wasn't feeling well. She sounded distant. Somehow I knew. I knew something had happened. There was a tension.

"Larissa?"

"Yes dear."

"What's wrong?" and then a pause, just long enough to know for certain.

"What do you mean?"

Silence. She sighed.

"I could never lie to you, could I? I ran into my friend Mitch the other day." Downturned inflection. Agonizing pause.

"See, me and him used to date, I mean, mostly..."

"Larissa?"

"I slept with him. I couldn't help myself. I saw him on the street and... I slept with him."

My mind became pudding. But there was more. I could hear it in her voice. There was more.

"I...If I knew there wasn't more." I said.

"I'm staying in California."

I told her I'd call her from the road the next day, to see what she wanted to do. I asked her if she loved me.

"Yes."

If it was over.

"I don't know."

It couldn't be over! She told me everything. I accepted it all. So she slept with some guy. Two months ago, I was telling her she should fuck as many guys as she could. But staying in Cali? I couldn't move to California. How the hell could this happen! She told me everything. I thought she told me everything. How could I be wrong?

I got in my car and drove. I quickly found that this is not something one really does in San Francisco, California, so I parked and listed to Nine Inch Nails as loud as my stereo would allow. After a time I convinced myself that it was all going to be ok. Somehow, I slept.

It was time to say, "Goodbye" to the sundrenched streets and facades of San Francisco, California. But Justin was really sick. We couldn't get him out of bed. He was expected for his first day of work at Sandia National Labs in less than 48 hours. "Maybe if I sleep I'll feel OK to travel," he said. So the rest of us got breakfast.

Justin was still out when we got back. Breakfast had been a terror. I was so depressed. Shawn, Rebecca, and Robbie were not. Shawn and Rebecca had decided to go to the Grand Canyon on the way back to Albuquerque. Robbie wasn't sure he wanted to go, but was going to follow them. I was left with basically no option. I had to be the one to get Justin back.

We parted on contentious terms. I felt rather betrayed. It was no matter. There were more important things on my mind, and now I had plenty of time to work them out. Justin could sleep as long as the hostel would let him. I was free to wander.

I walked along the San Francisco bay, where the army used to load ships for World War II. I remember all these tourists looking at me, as I was, mightily down and sulking. What could they have thought?

"How is it that there is the sad sad person walking around a tourist destination?" seemed to flash across their faces.

I couldn't care less. The gravity of the situation had engulfed me. I had been left by my friends, somehow had to make my way home; and all this with the weight of the potential end of a love the level of which I had never experienced before. I sat, looking at the bay, and determined that Larissa Coat was the love of my life. I had to do anything and everything I could to be with her.

I called her to let her know I was leaving late. She had the idea to meet in Baker California, where her car died. She had to pick it up.

She said, "Baker is known for two things. First, it is the entry into death valley, so it has the world's biggest thermometer. Second, it is the home to the "Mad Greek" restaurant, which reportedly has world-class cuisine," so we determined we would meet at the Mad Greek around midnight.

Justin still wasn't moving. It was time to get stern. First I had to wake him up, at least to the extent that I knew he could hear me. Justin has a supreme talent for sleeping. This was easier said than done. Next, I had to make sure he understood that if we didn't leave soon, he wasn't going to make the first day of work at Sandia Fucking Laboratory. He understood. We left around 4pm.

Middle California sucks. Even in December, at night, there is something most arduous about driving most of the length of California in a sitting. Still, we made it to Baker, California, a little late, but there. Justin had been unable to drive. I was already tired, but seeing the love of my life invigorated me.

She sat in a booth at the window, talking to the friend who had brought her here. I couldn't go in. I didn't have any money, and I had to sit a while to reflect and gather strength. Justin wanted food, so he said he'd send her out.

We sat on my car's hood and chatted a while. Justin and Larissa's friend came out. Justin wanted to go back to sleep. It seemed like we were just going to part ways, some strange encounter at midnight. "See ya." But I had to talk to Larissa. I convinced Larissa's friend to give me some time.

"Ten minutes?" Ok.

We walked off a ways. I touched her cheek. She couldn't look at me.

"I love you, Larissa. I know... Larissa, you are the one. My one true love."

She smiled, "Silly boy."

"It's true."

"Silly silly boy."

"I'll move to Riverside."

"I... You don't want to live in Riverside."

"But I will. I will, because I love you. I love in a way I'll never love again. I'm not being fake, here, Larissa. You're everything."

"I love you to. I have to get home. We're tired. Call me?"

And that was it. I kissed her. She left.

Ordeals. One after the other. More. Loading on. Too much. Hours without sleep built on days without much sleep. Total exhaustion. Emotional pain at a level I hadn't felt before, built upon exhaustion. Lost. Vacant. But somehow keep'n on. Justin has to get to his first day at Sandia National Laboratories. I have to get home. No rest. Not now. Keep on moving.

So I drove through Arizona, Justin comatose next to me, at high speed, listening to Tori Amos as loud as the stock speakers in my Geo Storm could handle.

Tori is Larissa's sister, or might as well have been. It was Larissa singing to me. *She* had been silent all these years. It was her asking *me* when *I* was going to love myself as much as she did. To this day I weep listening to those songs. Larissa still speaks to me when Tori sings.

Piss break at four-o'clock in the morning, in the pitch black Arizona night, near Flagstaff. The mountains in the middle of winter. The cold on my face. I stretch my neck, look up at the Milky Way; the first time I really saw it. Something so very real came upon me. Perhaps this really is the end. Perhaps I will never see her again. Somehow I had yet to weep.

Daybreak, hours later. Running low on gas. I can't go on. I found a parking lot and tried to sleep, but the thought of the cops pounding on my window disallowed that. I managed to wake Justin after a number of attempts. I had been out of money for days. He was down to his last \$20. We filled the thermos and put the rest in the car.

"I've got twenty-five bucks and a cracker, do you think it's enough to get us there?"

Justin tried to drive. I managed to close my eyes for about an hour, but he couldn't continue. We were almost at the border with NM. Then, my mind went blank.

I made it to Albuquerque. I don't know how. I try to remember, but nothing comes. Perhaps I somehow slept while driving. Maybe I discovered teleportation. At any rate, the next thing I remember is dropping Justin off. He could hardly say goodbye.

Less than half an hour to home. Sleep finally became a possibility. The excitement of that got me there.

The first thing I noticed when I got home was that there was a pile of Robbie's CDs lying in the center of the living room where they had not been before.

"Aw FUCK!" We had been robbed. The first thing I did was get out my tin of redbud and smoked a bowl. Next, I called the cops. Third, I put the tin and all other paraphernalia in my car. There would be no rest for me.

Robbie had ended up going to the Grand Canyon with Shawn and Rebecca. He drove up about an hour after I called the cops. I stopped him in the driveway.

"There's been a...something's happened."

Robbie looked happy. I was about to ruin his day.

"We've been robbed."

This did, in fact, make Robbie unhappy. He fumed until the law arrived.

We guessed that it had been Stipe, our other roommate, who had perpetrated the crime. I knew him to be a junkie and a thief, and the things stolen pointed in his direction. It appeared that only things Stipe would have considered "sold-out" or "pop" or "mainstream bullshit" were missing. I take great pride in the fact that he stole very little of my stuff. Robbie, however, wasn't so lucky.

The detective finally showed up. He kept saying to us things like, "You college kids sure smoke a lot of weed, huh?" Robbie basically fessed. I didn't.

It had been a total of 36 hours straight awakeness. The thousand things on my mind could not deter sleep, and so I slept. I felt dead when I finally closed my eyes. Not because of extreme sleep dep, or the feeling of defilement brought on by the robbery of one's things, not even the pot and drinks I imbibed to ensure the process of slumber. This was an emotional death, the second in half a year. Just at the moment sleep came, it washed over me that Larissa, the love of my life, my one true love, would never again be with me.

At that moment, my soul died. I have yet to bring it back.

