

Beachwood Motel

When I knocked on the door, I felt my knuckles scrape against the cheaply painted wood that had probably been chipping before I was born. I'd never been in this part of ~~██████████~~^{home}, but I imagine the smell was exclusive to the motel, so I held my breath while I was in the elevator and didn't get a chance at fresh air until I stopped at the bathroom down the hall and stuck my head out the window. If my face was purple at all, I guess it wasn't purple enough to draw the attention of the young black-haired girl with the scar on her chin. She was my girlfriend.

I yelled from the top window.

"Jesus Christ, you could have warned me I'd need an oxygen mask before coming in here, ~~██████████~~."

"You were in such a rush that I didn't have a chance to let you know." Even from the third-floor window, I could tell that she chuckled when she said it. I second guessed myself before asking her to come with me. Still though, for reasons I was terrified to ask about, she mentioned being familiar with this rat hole of a motel when I told her this is where ~~██████████~~^{friend} was staying. So, she led me here, and here we were. Because of the nature of this mission and the nature of my relationship with ~~██████████~~^{friend} and the nature of my recent diagnosis, I asked her to wait outside. It's important to consider these things when less than three weeks into a relationship. Either way, the relationship I had with ~~██████████~~^{friend} was much more complex.

"Is he your brother, ~~██████████~~?", she asked when she let the cigarette she'd lit fall from her lips into the puddle that married sand and dirt between her feet. She sighed and reached into her back pocket, pulling out the same pack that'd sourced the now drowned cigarette. It didn't seem like she cared for having wasted the cancer stick as much as she was annoyed for now having to make the effort of lighting another one.

I was grateful that from here I wouldn't have to hold my breath while she flicked the lighter and pulled air in through the end of the lipstick-stained yellow filter. I hate that smell. Truthfully, I hate people who smoke. They say hate is a strong word but when the feeling is stronger than a simple dislike, it's hard to pinpoint the right term to use. The term *disdain* seems too harsh, oddly enough. I didn't have a sense of disdain for the girl that stood in her flip flops and jean shorts, watching me watch her struggle to light the cigarette. I did, however, *hate* the fact that she liked to blow smoke in my face every time she lit one. From up here, I was safe.

I didn't answer her question. Even worse, I'm getting off track. So, I knocked on the door.

^{Friend} ██████ left hints of where he was going before he disappeared, and this wasn't anything new for him, so it wasn't something that concerned me at first. I was, however, concerned when he stopped answering my calls.

I knocked again.

When he stopped answering my calls, I looked through the last few texts he sent me before he went *missing*, as his mom liked to call it. You know, the kind of person that's fast to say her son was missing, but never does much about it.

I'm still knocking, by the way.

The last text message he sent me said, ██████, *ill b by the water on the part of town that smells like gasoline. yk the beachwood place? thx. call u soon. don't ask why im leaving. u know how it goes.*

I did not in fact know what the *Beachwood place* was. But now here I was, losing my temper as I knocked on a door to no response, doing everything in my power to prove the doctors' diagnosis wrong.

The next knock turned into a montage of knocks that melded into each other until I felt a splinter from the peeling wood penetrate the middle knuckle on my right hand. I could feel a fire building inside my chest. I spoke to myself and counted.

One.

Just calm down. Who knows that he's going through and what he's had to deal with these past few days.

Two.

Has he even eaten? Where is he getting the money to buy himself food? Damn, this stupid splinter really hurts.

Three.

What kind of idiot chooses a such a smelly damn motel as a hiding spot? And the dirtiest beach in ^{home} ~~██████████~~ at that. What kind of IDIOT even runs away from his family? How hard is it to answer a phone call?

The counting wasn't working, and so I started to bang on the door again, this time in a way that would've made any passerby think I had a personal issue with the motel room door as I kept an open palm now and began to slap it harder and harder, exchanging turns between my left and right hand. The knob started to turn.

His ash brown hair covered most of his face and he smelled like cheap liquor and cigarettes too.

"Why are you knocking so hard?", he said from behind the veil of matted down hair and the dry slob on his face that let me know he'd just woken up or hadn't bothered to wash his face at all today.

“Really? Is that seriously your opening line after disappearing on me? What happened to your phone? You know I don’t mind letting you disappear and pretending I don’t know anything about where you’re hiding, but not answering the phone? This whole routine of yours only works when I know you’re fine. When I know you didn’t die mixing God-knows-what together to try take yourself even further than this motel.”

He stood silent for a moment and stared at me blankly, then lowered his focus toward my *Grateful Dead* t-shirt. “You don’t even listen to them.”, he said blankly, making it known to the world that it was in-fact possible to audibly speak in all lowercase letters.

I couldn’t be all mad, especially when looking at the current picture in front of me. Prior to the “disappearance”, he talked to me about how much he wanted to vanish from the Earth and go somewhere no one would find him. At least he’d been considerate enough to let me know where he was going, sort of. I took a deep breath again. This time I didn’t count.

“So?” I looked at him wondering if I really had to ask him to come in. It felt strange having to ask the kid that made a habit out of showing up at my house and sleeping on my couch uninvited if I was allowed to step into a room I was quite frankly dreading getting a better smell of. I swear, even outside of the room, my eyes were subtly tearing up like if I was cutting up onions or garlic or whatever it is that makes you cry.

He stared back at me, still speaking in all lowercase. “So?”

I guess there really is no room for pride in a situation like this.

“Can I come in?”

Wood Demon

As I stepped through the doorframe to enter the room, I heard a sudden and loud crunching sound, like a wooden baseball bat being broken in half from a passionate swing, followed by the feeling of tiny daggers stabbing my ankle from all angles. My right leg had stepped through the wooden panel that gave entry to ^{Friend} [REDACTED]'s carpeted room, something that seemed out of place as it was, now also proving to be a nuisance and liability for this run-down motel. The air tasted like a combination of stale Cheetos and unflushed toilets. When I opened my mouth to speak, I almost gagged.

"Jesus Christ, ^{Friend} [REDACTED]. My stupid foot is stuck... in the... stupid... floor..."

I semi-yelled, still trying to be considerate of the people in the nearby rooms. Even when in a situation like this, because of him, I control myself.

"And... what is that smell? Or... taste?"

I coughed so hard that I had to remind myself to inhale the air I was so disgusted by. I could imagine a thousand tiny dust and trash particles entering my lungs with every inward breath.

"Can you please open a window or something? I can literally taste your unwashed underwear and dirty socks from where I'm standing, along with whatever else is fogging this room up."

"There are no windows", ^{Friend} [REDACTED] said blankly, staring at me like if there was nothing wrong with the current picture in front of him. He's been this way for months. If anything, I've only noticed him getting worse and the blank void behind his eyes was only getting deeper, despite the humanity in him that poked out from time to time.

I sighed, then spoke. "At least come closer so I can use you as an anchor to get my leg out."

I almost didn't want to pull my leg out because if he saw blood, he'd probably faint. I remembered him telling me about when he was in the second grade. He mentioned how he'd passed out after getting a papercut, and that after that the teachers would give him his assignments taped to cardboard so he wouldn't have to directly touch the edges of the paper. Almost ten years later and he's still a baby. All the while, shaking my leg around, I began struggling and tried to free myself from the mouth of this wooden, foot-eating demon.

^{friend} ██████ was unbothered. I felt a sense of relief when I noticed that, if anything, he was more likely to be holding in laughter. The void behind his eyes has been there as long as I've known him. Sometimes it seemed like him seeing me in pain was all it took to take him out of his daze and make him smile. It was never smiling for the serious pain you wouldn't want someone to laugh at, more often over something that he would've laughed at himself for too. Like how a ██████ is supposed to act, I think. Right now, the only reason he even bothered to make the effort of holding it in was because he figured that with how annoyed I already was, being laughed at in this moment was not likely to do him any good. In reality, I was slightly relieved to see him holding in his laugh.

"Get it unstuck.", he said shrugging with his arms bent and his palms out, like a ^{Famous person} ██████ on a stage being booed. This was the ^{friend} ██████ I knew. That thought brought me back to the harsh reality I'd been avoiding.

Despite the initial relief, for a moment I thought about how we got here. With the last six weeks in mind, I wondered if he even deserved to have had someone looking for him. Isn't it crazy how knowing someone is okay can remind you how angry you were at them to begin with?

It's like if, while you're searching and you're worried, and all the positive things they contribute to your life are highlighted and maximized by ten thousand percent. You see all their negatives as things to be grateful for. You see them in the way you'd speak about them at their funeral when it's time to say your part before departing from them for good. So in the same way that zero point two seconds ago, I was relieved to see ~~██████~~^{friend} and wanted nothing more than to hear him laugh. It's one thing to care for somebody who probably doesn't deserve to be cared for, but it reaches new levels when that person uses your unrequited protection as the source of their amusement. With this, I thought back to the diagnosis the doctors gave me and the sudden shift in emotions I'd just experienced made them seem a little more credible.

I put my hand on his shoulder, the one closest to me, and used him as an anchor to pull my leg out. It's probably the most he's supported me in the last few years. As I stepped forward and pulled my leg out, feeling the many tiny daggers scrape along the sides of my ankle, keeping my shoe hostage while freeing my foot. I didn't mind until I placed my newly free foot down onto the carpet of the room's floor and felt it sink into a surface that was very wet. From one hell to another, I wondered what my poor foot ever did to deserve this coalition of undesirable textures so suddenly. There's little I hate more than the feeling of wet socks. ~~██████~~^{Friend} was like having on your favorite pair of socks and then stepping in a puddle. It would have been nice to know that this is where the day was going before I chose them, just like it would have been nice to know that ~~██████~~^{friend} would become such a nuisance before I decided to make myself his honorary big brother, except there was no honor to be found here.

"Why is the floor soaking wet?"

He stared at me for a moment before responding.

"I spilled something before you got here. I was going to clean it before you started beating on the door like a maniac."

"Two things." I paused and looked back down at the tiny cuts that ran along the victimized foot while the other sat comfortably in its shoe, no regard for what his paralleled twin had gone through. Then I looked at the scrawny ██████████ in a tank top and boxers that stood before me in a dimly lit and dirty grey room that housed only him and a bare mattress stained with God-knows-what. He was the beaten foot on the wet carpet, and I was the foot trying to find him a shoe. After everything he'd put me through, it wouldn't be long before we were both the beaten foot.

"One, you weren't going to clean this. You were going to let the carpet absorb it and dry." I scrunched my toes and felt the cuts on my feet scream in repulsion as they were contaminated with this mystery liquid.

"Two, what's even going on with this room?" I pointed at the remnants of the late foot-eating demon. "What's with the beaten down wooden entry-point that can't even hold itself together? Next time you choose to run away, at least let me know so I can give you some money to help you afford a better motel than this rat-hole." He stared at me for a moment, silent.

"I'm serious, ^{friend} ██████████."

For a second, I thought he was ready to explode and tell me everything that's been going on for the last few weeks. Then he stepped forward towards me, his legs shaking as if the explosion was building up inside of him. His arms stretched out towards me and he wrapped them around my torso. For a second, he was still, and the shaking stopped.

Then, he began to cry.