

baggage

by Nick Malone

I spent the night before I saw my first love for the last time watching 9/11 conspiracy videos and Shawshanking through a wholesale-size bag of shredded Chihuahua cheese until I felt like I had to throw up. Once I felt my stomach start to bubble and squirm in protest, I hoisted my MacBook and shitty body out of bed, went to sit by the toilet, and got to Googling.

“Rigor setting in on a dead horse.”

“Drone bomb victims.”

“Voluntary sex slaves.”

“Drinking liquified animal fat.”

No. Better.

“What comes out when you get liposuction?”

No. Better.

“Has a doctor ever drank what came out after liposuction?”

No. The best.

“How fat do I have to get to qualify for liposuction?”

My stomach came to rest more quickly than I'd expected and instead of getting to vomit undigested cheese in a warm bliss, I fall into one of those sorts of sleeps that feels like you didn't sleep at all, but instead watched the hours tick by while you blinked over and over and prayed for the sun.

I met Liam like how people meet in porn- chance brings two strangers together and they wind up

fucking just to- what? Pass the time? Have the story? Risk getting caught for either the inherent turn-on of sneaking around or the inherent possibility of a threesome? Whatever our motivations were, I was fifteen years old watching anime in a stranger's basement bedroom when I lost my virginity and had my first kiss in the same span of fourteen minutes (I counted.)

At the time, I was only out to my closest friends- not that the rest of the world couldn't have guessed, given my bored valley girl drawl and insistence on wearing neon blue chino pants- but right before we kissed the first time, we came out to each other. His parents were as Type A as they come, and the A was for Asshole, while mine barely batted an eyelash when five-year-old me demanded posters of both the Spice Girls and Britney Spears to display above my bed. Yet somehow, when we fucked, he seemed more level-headed, more sure of what we were. Regardless of how much I enjoyed it, how much I loved talking to him and how impossible it was to get him out of my mind, I ran off and tried sex with a girl because I'm a slow learner. It should go without saying that I gave Liam a call very shortly after a brief stint of hooking up with an aspiring teen B-movie actress named Ashley whose nails I painted after we fucked.

At this point, I should mention that Liam was turning 21 when we met. I made a habit of getting

dropped off at a friend's house most weekends, then texting him their address so he could pick me up to go out and spend the night with him.

It was fun until it wasn't. I woke up one day with a radio static in my head that deafened me and created a pounding in my temples. I wished I was one of those people who remembered nothing, but I remembered everything. I sobered until it subsided and realized I'd lost him. Two years ticked by, marked with random missed calls, drunken voicemails from someone I barely recognized on anniversaries of our Firsts, or times when he wanted to blame me for not being able to walk in a straight line. I had no desire to save him, no drive to watch the good parts of him that could sometimes be heard through crackling phone lines circling the drain.

But something clicks in me that I don't expect to on a Friday night. The refrigerator buzzing turns out not to be a big enough buffer between myself and thoughts of imminent death and all the ways it could very well happen to me. I scroll through my contacts to find him how I left him- a cropped photo of him in a hat that I bought while he holds a dead trout, and a number illuminated in blue, because I don't date people with Androids.

Wanna come over? I type.

His response is almost instant.

I thought you weren't talking to me anymore.

Shut up. I'm bored.

Why can't you ever just say horny?

Because that isn't what I mean, and that word is gross. I'm bored and I'm gonna lose my shit if I have to spend another second alone in this house.

So, I have to be a babysitter?

Yeah, but you might get to fuck the baby.

Okay, that's gross.

I know, I'm REALLY sorry. I regretted that the second I sent it.

Lol, I'm on my way.

I recite along with the commercials between TV court cases while I wait for him.

“If you or a loved one have been diagnosed with mesothelioma, you may be entitled to compensation,” I whisper. I'm deeply engaged in a case in which a mother sues her own son for refusing to pay her back on his moped loan. The son insists she said it was a gift, but I can't think of any mother in her right mind who would bankroll an adult man getting a moped.

I hear the familiar rumble of his old station wagon getting louder and louder. When the knock on the door finally comes, I play it cool.

“Come in,” I shout. My phone vibrates.

I've never been in your house b4.

Come and get me.

I lift myself off the couch, walk over and press my forehead to the cold wooden door for a moment, taking a deep breath. I open the door and there he is- towering a good head over me, a short military

crew cut, a small mouth curled into a smile, arms behind his back.

“Hi,” escapes my lips.

“Hi,” he says, and pulls two pre-rolled blunts and a condom from behind him, smiling wide. He walks past me with a quick kiss on the cheek before diving onto the loveseat in front of the TV.

“Why do you think I don’t have my own condoms?” I can’t keep from smiling at seeing him in my house for the first time- he seems violently out of place, like a cable guy overstaying his welcome.

He laughs a little. “Wait, you mean to tell me that you haven’t just been *waiting around* for me this whole time? That you just *couldn’t* move on and just *needed* to be in my arms?”

I pull his hair hard enough to make a point, but just light enough to show that I don’t actually care as I take my seat. “You’re an asshole, and that thing is ribbed. I don’t have a vagina, that is *not* going inside me.” I reach over and take an unnecessarily long hit before plopping my body down on the couch and wondering if I made myself seem too heavy. He smiles at me anyway.

“What should we watch?” Liam murmurs, landing his feet on the ottoman, absentmindedly clicking through the guide. He drapes his arm around me and it feels foreign and familiar at once.

“Keep scrolling,” I say, sliding in closer to him. The best thing about being high is your superhuman focus on any and all television

screens. The worst part is that if a home invader had come in at that moment, there is no shot in hell that I would’ve noticed.

I grab his thigh and he jumps. “Ooh! That one,” I say, my eyes flickering.

“Jesus Christ, you fucking scared me. This?”

“Yes! Oh my god, you’re gonna love it.”

“What is it?”

“Okay, so every episode, there’s an eligible bachelor or bachelorette looking for love and there are three contestants with three pieces of baggage filled with super fucked up things about them, and the bigger the bag, the more fucked up it is, and if the bachelor can’t take their baggage, he sends them home. Whoever’s baggage he *can* handle wins a date.”

Liam processes for a moment. “Okay, I think I get it. What would your baggage be?”

“We dated for almost two years, can’t you just guess?”

He smiles. “I mean, I could, but I want to hear what you think yours are.”

“Okay, that’s fair. Do I get to hear what you think mine are after?” I ask, wiggling my eyebrows at him.

“Don’t you want to hear *my* baggage?”

“Not really, no.”

“You’re totally only half joking and that makes it *so* much worse,” he says mockingly. He clicks his teeth at me. I wriggle in my seat.

I pause for a moment, letting my brain tinker and turn. “Alright. I think that my littlest baggage would be that one time... I was all alone, it was really late at night, I totally had my door closed, and I said the N-word with a hard R.”

“Holy shit, why?”

“I don’t know, just to see how it felt, I guess.”

“Did you like it?”

“Not even a little bit. Nobody was even there and my skin was like, crawling. I went online and donated five dollars to the NAACP afterward.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Check my bank statement.”

“I don’t think I want to.” He takes another hit and inhales sharply. “What’s your medium baggage?” He asks, coughing.

“I guess it’s probably that sometimes I lie and say I’m only 17 so guys with teen fetishes will have sex with me.”

“Guys with teen fetishes? You mean pedophiles,” he winces.

“I mean, to be fair, you were one of them.”

Silence between us for a moment. I break it.

“It’s been a really long time since I’ve seen you look this healthy.”

“Oh. Thanks, I think.”

“It’s a good thing. You look like how you looked when we first met. Being clean took, like, five years off your complexion.” I offer a laugh.

“More like a hundred,” he says,

twirling the remote around in his hand, staring at the screen. “Coke made me look like a corpse, not like someone who’s just too old to be wearing a drug rug.” He looks at me almost blankly. “After the last time that you decided you weren’t talking to me-”

“You mean the last time you ripped a line and abandoned me at a party where I didn’t know anyone?” I interrupt, angling my face down to glare at him. Not in a mean way, we’ve talked about it already. Just in a way that reminds him where we stand.

“Yes, that time. I swear to God, in those couple months, my eyes were so sunken and grey and like, Angelina Jolie-esque that a group of like, four high schoolers asked me if I had any *PCP*. I was in a *suit*.”

I choke a little on the smoke. “I want to think that isn’t funny. Really, I do.”

“Dick.”

I pause. There are a few reasons I called him over here. “Have you seen Chris lately?”

His face twists. “Really?”

“Yeah,” my voice dips into a whisper.

“Please don’t do this. I really don’t want to go there today. Let’s just hang out.”

“Okay.” I wait. “Do you want a beer?”

“Sure.”

I hoist myself off the couch and head to the fridge. I take two PBR’s from the back row so my mom

won't notice they're gone. I realize that all the people from before he got clean are probably on his blacklist now.

"Do you ever think really ugly things?" Liam calls suddenly.

I return with the beers and take my seat back on the couch. "I mean, yeah, obviously. I basically just told you that I gave being racist a trial run. What do you mean?"

"Like, sometimes I think about killing myself after I turn 60 because I don't think people are capable of smelling good after that."

I snort and tilt my head to face the ceiling. "There *have* to be some exceptions to that rule."

"I have never met a person over 60 that I wanted to smell," he says, almost somber, almost resolute.

I stare at the ceiling fan until it turns into one big white UFO, napalming us with little specks of dead skin.

"Well, I mean, as long as you're just thinking it, I guess that's not so bad."

"Okay, but I don't always just *think* bad stuff. Sometimes, when homeless people ask me for money at the train station, I pretend I'm deaf."

"What the fuck, Liam."

"I'm serious. I start speaking fake sign language and I've done it so many times that it's just second nature to me now. The other day I did it with earbuds in."

I turn back to face him.

"I mean, that's fucked up, but I

know a girl who pretends she's pregnant so she can get a seat on the bus every time."

"That's not the same. She's a woman, she has to lie to stay alive. I don't have any of that going for me. I'm white, I'm a guy and I have a decent job. I literally always have singles to give. I just really like getting a Coke before my train ride home." He looks down at his hands like a guilty toddler.

"You don't have to be Mother Teresa just because you're white. Get your Coke, just don't pretend to be deaf while you do it."

"I guess so."

The whirr of the fan washes over both of us until it begins to sound like the roar of a great ocean.

"Mother Teresa sucked by the way." Liam mumbles.

"Yeah, I just feel like it's a little tone-deaf to point out the little bad things when she did so many *good* things," I counter.

"Do you really think that secretly baptizing people on their deathbed is just a little bad?"

I shrug a very dramatic shrug. He raises an eyebrow.

"Also, tone-deaf? You do realize you're wearing a blue bandana. Like a Crip." He tilts his head downward and raises his eyebrows in judgment.

"Are you serious?" I scan his eyes for any trace of a joke. "Gang members don't wear bandanas on their head like fucking Rosie the Riveter. God, you're suburban," I

sigh, lifting myself off the couch and toward the kitchen.

"So you don't think that stuff makes me a bad person?" he calls from the living room. I stand in front of the open refrigerator for a moment, thinking not only about the question, but about whether or not he'll think my life has fallen apart if I bring back a giant carton of pizza Goldfish along with my beer.

"No, I don't think that thinking old people smell gross makes you a bad person," I call back, closing the fridge and deciding against the snacks. "I mean, I'm glad you don't work in hospice or anything but I don't think it makes you *bad*." I go back and join him on the couch and lace my hand in his.

"Do you remember when I first started driving and I made you come to the gas station with me every weekend because I was so afraid I was gonna blow up?" I ask.

"And you realized I was wearing a wool sweater so you made me *ground* myself on every type of material on the car, and then *still* made me walk all the way down the block?" He shakes his head at the thought. "Static electricity really isn't that powerful. I don't know why you watch videos about science. You hate science."

"I know," I mumble, and lay my head on his chest. "It's not science I hate. I think it's just God," I say into his shirt.

"I know, babe. He made rules

no one likes. We gotta roll with them, though."

"Fuck physics."

Time inches by like a glacier, we pop beers open with a snap and fizz like clockwork. My head rises and falls on his chest and our legs intertwine, taking root in the torn up paisley loveseat that I picked out from Ashley Furniture when I was thirteen. If I'd known he was going to see it one day, I would've picked something different. I would've made the more grown-up choice, something burgundy, something leather. I trace the hem along the side, watching my index finger rise and fall. I glance up and notice him staring down at me.

"What?" I ask. I smile and hide my eyes behind my hands, then part two fingers to stare back at him anyway.

"Why'd you call me over here?"

His face is stony, serious.

"I didn't call you, I texted you. I'm a child of the Internet, this isn't Wuthering Heights." I smirk up at him, swiping at the tension in the air with all I have. He doesn't move an inch.

"You're an English major, do you really think they had phones in Wuthering Heights?"

"You know what I meant."

"Fine, then. Why did you *text* me over here?"

"I mean, you said yourself, I can never just say hor--"

"No, that's not it. We've been laying here for hours. Why did you

really call me over here? I know there are other guys you could've called if that was it."

"Well *that* is the most flattering bullshit I've ever heard in my life."

"You're smarter than this."

My heart races and I feel like I can't break his gaze or something very bad will happen. If I lose the staring contest, 9/11 will happen again. If I lose the staring contest, my mother will die. If I lose the staring contest, I will gain fifteen pounds.

I pull myself off of him, never letting my eyes leave his. He's right. I am smarter than this.

"I'm really lonely, okay?" I feel my voice break and I shake my head a little. "You made me really lonely. I stopped needing to impress you, then I took a step back and realized how exhausted I was and now I'm scared to impress anyone else."

He says nothing. His face doesn't soften.

"I only know how to impress you. So now, no matter where I am, I feel alone. I am alone."

"You wouldn't have to be if you didn't want to." His voice is clear and cold.

"Thanks, that's really helpful." I scoff and break eye contact, fiddling with my cuticles while I feel the burn of his glare.

"You know the best version of you."

"I *know*," I say, a little louder than I'd intended. I flick my eyes back up. I can hear both of our

breathing.

I just want to feel something.

My lip quivers and I can't make it stop. I sigh and feel tears well up in my eyes. I wipe them away quickly and defiantly.

"Do you want to know my biggest baggage?"

"Sure."

"I got raped and you let it happen."

"What?"

"You heard me. And everybody thinks I'm fucking crazy because I don't care. And everybody thinks I'm stupid because whenever I think about you, all I think about is how you're the only person in the world who understands why people with Tourette's are so hot. Or how much I like sitting across from you at Denny's, knowing you're gonna order a short stack with a dish of *plain blueberries* on the side like a fucking serial killer. Or how much I like hearing your shitty, loud car outside my window at three in the morning because I *know* your dad gave you money to fix the muffler and you bought hibachi for us instead. Or how I *never* want to see you happy with somebody other than me. Or how I never feel like a person, and *always* feel like a joke about a person until I'm with you. But I don't get to say those things, because those are stupid things to say. And now all I feel is fucking... stupid." I inhale, trying to get the tears to climb back up my face and into their ducts. I swallow my sobs until they sit in my

stomach in a calcified deposit that I can get sucked out for a doctor to drink.

"And now you probably think I'm stupid too," I choke out. "I can't even think of any other words."

I feel the heat of his stare start to cool. He puts his hand behind my head and runs his fingers through my hair, gliding with a tender gentleness, scanning my face. He makes a little frown.

"I didn't want to hurt you. I still don't want to hurt you," he says.

"I know."

The only thing in the world that moves is his hand through my hair. We sit there staring at one another for just a second too long.

"I just wanted to feel everything. I just wanted to feel safe."

"You're smart. You've always been smart." He tilts his head a little, like a puppy. "You know you can only have one of those."

"Yeah."

He clicks off the TV, pulls my head toward him and kisses me. He tastes like citrus gum and Carmex.

"It was really nice to see you," I whisper between kisses.

"It was nice to see you too."

We go upstairs and I choose.

Laying on my side, I take a deep breath in and feel his arm draped across my chest, our naked bodies rising and falling in a steadfast calm. We work as one, each a well-oiled cog in the other's machine. I don't think about anything, but I feel

something, so I say it.

"I love you," I whisper into the blackness. "You don't have to say it back if you don't want to."

The room spins like one of those tunnels that make you dizzy at a carnival. The room spins like how he spun me around on the dance-floor when he snuck me into his band's first show. The room spins like the universe, outward forever, further and further, shrinking our heartbeats into the deafening silence of space.

"I love you too."

I feel my face cool, draining of its reddened life.

"Okay."