

4 - Bryan

Bryan had only one thing going through his head as he awoke in K.J.'s bed: - how badly his arm hurt.

"Ah," he said quietly to himself, trying to adjust his arm out from underneath K.J.'s head without waking her. The feat was difficult, and, in a matter of only a small attempt, it was proven he was not up to task, inadvertently nudging her awake in his efforts.

She smiled at him, which was far better than what he half-expected, which was an imitation of a shrieking banshee or the Screaming Man painting he'd always seen around in movies and history books. Bryan reciprocated the warm response the best he could, though, with his aching arm and the uncomfortable way he'd rested on his neck, it was difficult for him to pay much attention to appearances.

"This bed's not big enough for two people," K.J. responded, a small, high-pitched laugh came next, and something between that and the morning breath she shot in his direction like a missile made it noticeable how awkward of a situation they were in.

Whatever magic or contact-buzz they must have felt in the previous night no longer felt so infectious, instead, what was apparent was that Bryan had spent the night in bed with a woman that had a high-pitched laugh and morning breath. The puzzle pieces that once felt so seamlessly in-place were jagged, corner pieces trying to be wedged into the center. If relationships were best when one took the scenic route, he and her had taken a short-cut to the finish line.

"We'll have to find ourselves a bigger bed," Bryan agreed, however, right as he said it, he questioned himself.

Did he think there would be a next time? Was that too assuming? It might have been easier had they been drunk the night before. At least then, they could chalk it up to a drunken night of wild sex with no strings attached. Bryan, instead, had spent the entire night cuddling with this stranger, an act that implied he saw something more in her. The whole thing was very awkward for him, and the red-hot heat in his chest only worked to make it worse for him.

"Maybe we will," K.J. agreed, although, Bryan could tell she had picked up on his accidental, but presumptuous choice of words as being abrupt.

"I am not really good at this kind of stuff," Bryan let out. In an effort to make things less uncomfortable for himself, he effectively made things more uncomfortable for himself. His voice trembled as he spoke, and he wasn't for certain if it was because his nervousness, because he was just waking up, or a combination of both.

"Believe me, neither am I," K.J. reassured, leaning herself up from the bed and to a seated position. Bryan stared at the back of her head for only a moment until he decided it was probably for the best, he did the same.

“I actually have, uh,” Bryan took his cellphone out from his back-pocket and checked it. He had received several texts from Scott, one of which said nothing except for “Fuck you,” and saw that the time said it was 7am. “I actually have a speech class that starts soon, but, uh,” Bryan blurted out. It was a complete lie, however. Monday was one of his free days from school and he’d even also made for certain to request off work as well, knowing he’d likely be tired by the party’s end. Then again, given how difficult it was for him to make words all of a sudden, perhaps a Speech class was worth thinking about.

K.J. seemed not to notice anything off, merely shaking her head in agreement with him. “Oh, I completely get it,” she said, climbing to her feet and stretching out her arms before walking toward the door and opening it. Bryan readied himself to join the rest of the guys in making a walk of shame out from each girls’ dorm room. He imagined it was less shameful when guys did it and more a badge of honor, however.

And, ... that was that. Bryan forced a one-armed hug, exchanged smiles with her, and then, found himself on his way. He walked away from the night’s events, leaving them behind as nothing except for a memory. But, at the same time, he knew he’d see to it that this wasn’t the last he saw of this girl.

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“Yeah, they fucking nearly beat my skull in because of you!” Scott ranted, trying to muster the same bit of passionate anger he must have surely felt when it first happened, and failing to do so. The inflection was there, but his heart simply wasn’t in it.

“You’ll have to excuse me for possessing your body and making you piss those guys off. Dear lord, why can’t I use my powers for good!” Bryan snapped back, letting his own irritation get the better of him.

Scott shot him a shocked look, acting as though the thought of his own wrongness was too difficult a concept for him to fathom.

“Well, you fucking never do anything there at the parties anyways, just sit there like a damned serial killer.”

“I spent the night with someone last night,” Bryan replied, ignoring his desire to provide a snarky rebuttal of his own in return.

He needed to be on Scott’s good side for the most part. Scott was his ticket to every party and to relevance, always keeping him beloved and “cool,” when Bryan’s introverted tendencies would have otherwise had him fall into obscurity.

Scott smiled at him when he said that, although, it was far from a photogenic grin. The black eye he sported, along with the swelling around his cheek made it much more cringe-worthy than what was intended.

“You banged that one Kelsey Jay girl, didn’t you!?” Scott yelled out, hitting Bryan on the shoulder with his fist, sort-of in a buddy o’ pal cliché kind of way.

“No,” Bryan clarified, “All we did was spend the night together. I didn’t have sex with her.”

“Then, you had no reason you couldn’t have been there last night to help me out. You always have my back!”

“I know and I’m sorry. I didn’t think you were that drunk and thought you’d be alright without me.”

“You didn’t happen to see who it was that I made mad, did you?” Scott asked, apparently moving on and accepting Bryan’s apology.

“You don’t remember?” Bryan asked.

“I must have blacked out, ‘cause I can’t remember anything after I went looking for you,” Scott said.

“I didn’t see anyone that looked like they wanted to hurt you.” Bryan answered. It was the truth. Even if it wasn’t, it’s not as if Bryan would have told him anyways, no sense in starting a fight that could have been prevented.

“I can’t wait until I’m through with this place,” Scott said, sounding dejected. It was a statement that caught Bryan off-guard.

College seemed like it was tailor made for Scott in just about every way imaginable. He was a talented and good-looking guy that loved to party and drink, and one that was also very popular with his classmates and teachers.

“You’ve always seemed to flourish in this environment.”

Scott looked at Bryan with a blank stare, then, plainly said: “I’ve never flourished.”

“You’ve always dated the prettiest girls, you’re a shoe-in to receive a contract for soccer, and you’re always the center of attention in every place you go. Let’s face it, buddy, you’ve never not flourished,” Bryan said, patting Scott on the back and offering him a playful smile.

Scott seemed to ignore Bryan’s praises, instead, opting to start a new topic entirely. “This girl, you think you’re going to stick with her?”

Bryan chewed on Scott’s words for a couple of seconds before answering him. His mind traveled back to the morning he left behind with K.J. and the warmth that was once inside of his chest. It was all he’d thought about since, and he was interested in someone for the first time in a long time.

“I like her, I mean, I think I like her. I didn’t really have a chance to get to know her, but she seemed like a nice person,” Bryan said.

“That’s great, Bryan. I’m glad,” Scott said warmly. “And maybe she’ll be so kind as to accompany you when we take that trip out of the mountain. Make some real memories of this place that involve your head crammed inside the pages of some book or getting it on with your laptop.”

“I haven’t even really thought about the trip,” Bryan admitted, even though there were only a few short weeks left until it’d be happening. “Just wanted to get through the final exams without completely unraveling all the work I’ve done this semester.”

“That trip is all I’ve been able to think about. The thought of not having to deal with all the petty drama bullshit that this University has,” Scott said, ignoring the fact he was more often than not the instigator of most of the “petty drama bullshit” that came hurling itself in his direction.

“And what about you, are you still dating that Chelsea girl you’d been seeing?”

“No, I don’t think it’s going to work out with her.”

“I thought you liked her?”

“I did, but we wanted different things, and what I wanted fell a few short of monogamy, which ended up a deal breaker.”

“Most girls seem to have a problem with that, I’ve noticed. Weird,” Bryan said.

Scott nodded his head fondly, but Bryan could see the watery look in his eyes as well.

Bryan brought the straw of his drink up to his lips, slurping down the remainder of soda he had left.

5 - Crystal

“It is said that, thousands of years ago, The Aeonians rose up to the heavens. They shed themselves of their otherworldly powers, sacrificing themselves before God as a sacrifice to bring Maharris out from the darkness which once plagued it,” Mr. Dawson said dryly, the same ho-hum tone and demeanor that he always seemed to have whenever he gave lectures.

Crystal, along with the other students, were left with no other alternative than to try their best to keep their heads lifted, trying not to fall asleep with only ten brief minutes left of class time.

“The reason this concerns you is because it was at the top of Mt. Kass that these, so called, supernatural beings made their sacrifice to the Heavens. Story has it their souls were welcomed to paradise by God, with the essence of their power going to each of the five major cities. Verdicine to Acera, so-and-so to Jalint, blah, blah, and blah, and that they put a shield over each of their cities, keeping them protected. Now, the good of them was said to go up to the Heavens, but the bad supposedly stayed in the Mountains. And, not only that, but the souls from a war that happened several hundreds year later plagued the mountaintop with the wreaking stench of death.” Mr. Dawson continued.

“I won’t act like I believe any of this and I don’t expect that any of you will either, but you can believe so if you like. All I know is that there have been plenty of cult related murders in the Mountains, and that those are very, very real. Idiots that take biblical concepts and exploit them for their own bullshit agendas.” Mr. Dawson stopped for a moment, either to let everything sink in, or because he wanted to be able to focus on the class’ reaction to him using a swear word. *Such a rebel, that Mr. Dawson!*

“I was young once, believe it or not,” he chuckled weakly, although, no one else joined in. “And I know that all of you are adults, with most of you past the legal drinking age. I am not telling you not to go out and have fun. I’m not. But I do hope all of you will be responsible and be safe. Travel in groups and don’t do anything too reckless. Thank you and have a great break to those of you who will be returning next semester, and to the others, have a great future.” Mr. Dawson smiled for a moment but was quick to let it fade.

Crystal rose to her feet as fast as the rest of them. Dejected and tired, she didn’t really feel that sense of accomplishment she would have liked. Mostly because this wasn’t her final class for the week, with another full-day string of classes waiting for her tomorrow, but also because she still had a shift to work in only a couple short hours. That made it difficult to feel enthusiastic about much of anything.

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The Dine wasn’t a bad place to work, at least as far as jobs in food service were concerned. A mom and pop store through and through, the weekdays were often practically empty, which made a chill, albeit, quiet night. It wasn’t the caliber of some fancy restaurant like Italina’s Ollie’s Abil, but The Dine specialized in pastas, as well as other home-style offerings, all made with all the precision and love that a twenty-three-year-old with very little to no food experience could muster. The staff were also usually nonexistent, with only three employees in the restaurant during most periods, at best.

In this instance, because it was still particularly early, it was only Crystal and a middle-aged man with brown skin and tattoos named Nathan. Nathan mostly stuck to the back but would come out of his cave to help if it was requested.

He spent most days sitting in the back, washing dishes, or smelling his farts while he waited for more dishes to come. The guy would strike many as odd but was kind and polite if anyone tried to engage him in conversation. The only trait Crystal didn’t find particularly ideal about him was how he felt no shame spending the entirety of his shift doing nothing some nights, taking the fact he was the bus boy very literally, taking no initiative with anything else. This mean Crystal was usually left to hold down the fort by herself, waiting tables and preparing food to be served.

The whole thing sounded like a total bust when it was explained that way, but it wasn't so bad. The restaurant got far too few customers during this time to really complain. Not only that, the customers were mostly really understanding, which was a stark contrast from how they acted during much busier, more hectic times.

Most customers in the early hours were senior citizens. And, they weren't fresh members of the "older community" either, not fifty or sixty years old, but somewhere much closer to an A+ on the percentile. The customers were too busy falling in and out of death to care about whether they had to wait a few minutes on their buttermilk pancakes and glasses of tea. Bless their heart, Crystal loved them for it.

"Excuse me, young lady, could I trouble you for a small cup of tea, if it isn't too much trouble?" An old woman asked, with a voice sweet enough to cause a diabetic coma.

"Why, yes, you may, you beautiful son of a bitch," is what Crystal thought to herself. "Yes, you absolutely may," is what Crystal said, offering a kind smile the customer was more than happy to reciprocate.

Every now and again, she would come across a rude customer, ones that expected a free meal if she accidentally gave them ice for their drink they didn't ask for. But those were mostly and in-between.

It wasn't this day, but at an earlier one, she received a phone call from an old man that needed directions to help the find place. That was all well and good, but when she did, he informed her he was at the very same street she said, and the only place there was an old antique shop. Crystal had been confused at first, a small sprinkling of self-doubt entering her head that made her wonder if the street address she'd thought went to The Dine was someplace else entirely.

Or worse, that it was a phone-call sent from an alternative dimension (imagine the long-distance fees!). When she asked what color his car was, she was able to single out his vehicle and even waved him down from the so-called antique shop. Out of stubbornness, the old man played it up like the store looked different from how it looked last month (it hadn't) and that they should change it back to avoid confusion. Eventually, the old guy swallowed his pride and begrudgingly ate his soup.

Again, lots of senior citizens this time of the day.

Her 10 to 6 shift was mostly uneventful. Bland might even have been a fair description of the day, although, Crystal was always able to keep herself busy in the drought periods. She'd been working on a canvas drawing for her best friend Kathi's birthday, and not just any illustration, but a particularly silly, outlandish one at that. It'd be a depiction of cartoon anthropomorphic characters with inspirations drawn from various different morning TV shows of yesteryear. Kathi was very connected to her imagination, for her, it was either goofy cartoons or ... grotesque horror films. Crystal was trying to find a happy-medium between the two, a horror themed drawing with her own original cartoon characters. This included a very

large, very mean-looking goat. Some might have seen Kathi's darker tastes as morbid, but, in the end, she was one of the nicest people Crystal had ever met.

The drawing was coming along well, although, adding colors to it would be a bitch and a half. It was the most ambitious drawing she'd ever done, and it would take all of a month to finish.

The day picked up noticeably in the afternoon, but that was also around the time that a woman named Jennifer showed up to help with the customers. Jennifer was a woman in her late forties with brown hair and particularly tanned skin. She was also Crystal's boss, having owned the restaurant in all its glory. It had been passed down from her father after his death.

"I think I could go to a restaurant that was closed and expect better service than this," a younger, maybe fifteen or sixteen-year-old, teenage boy yelled out. Making it abundantly clear (Crystal clear!) that the time of nice or crazy old people had passed, and now, people would act rude or entitled.

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"You'll be finished with school pretty soon, won't you?" Jennifer asked, loading plates and silverware into a cart for Nathan to take back.

"That is correct," Crystal answered, having finished the sandwich she brought from home, she was now using what was left of her break to touch up on the canvas she'd been working on. The work was propped up over her knees while she sat, hunched up in a chair.

"What are you going to do after that?" Jennifer asked.

"Besides get the hell out of Jalint?" Crystal jested, taking her attention off the drawing in favor of conversation.

Jennifer feigned an offended look, acting as if she was surprised Crystal would be leaving her soon. The truth is, had Crystal not wanted to save up all the money she could for the trip to the mountains, her fourteen-day notice would have already long since been sent.

"Are you going to try and get a job with your drawings?" Jennifer asked, even though it was a question Crystal felt confident she already had the answer to.

Although, decent as an artist, Crystal never really saw herself as one. "I'd have to find someone who would actually be willing to pay money for me to do my drawings." She always figured she'd follow in her mother's footsteps and work in culinary arts in some form. However, in a bit of irony, it was a fellow chef trying to steer her away and encourage her to go with her own ambitions and blaze her own trail.

"It only takes one submission to completely change your life," Jennifer reminded, perking her eyebrows up in a matter-of-fact way.

Since meeting Jennifer, her aspirations for art had increased ten-fold. She started sending her work out and made a conscious effort to practice on a more regular basis. What she had learned above all else was that blazing a trail for oneself was very difficult to do.

“Yeah, but I have enough student debt to drown a fish, so I don’t really put much eggs in that basket right now.”

“You’re too quick to forget that you’re only twenty-three years old, Crystal. When I was your age, I didn’t have a clue what I was going to do with my life.”

“Yeah, but I am going to have a bachelor’s degree in Art, which is pretty much just as bad.” Crystal said, unable to suppress a small laugh at herself.

Jennifer glared at her for a second, pretending to be irritated. “You have all the time in the world, and you have talent. The kind of talent that most would kill just to have. It might not look like much to you, but this place was my father’s pride and joy, and he came from nothing, working almost thirty years in the mines. I am not saying it will be easy, but I see nothing but bright things in your future.”

Jennifer smiled at Crystal, who reciprocated just like the old lady had.

“Thanks, Jennifer.”