



BETTER THAN ALL THAT

by Christopher Gonzalez

I made the mistake of sitting next to Lucas at dinner. He spent the meal swiping through photos on his phone. After every fourth photo he'd stop and nudge me with his elbow, and when I would give in and look down, I'd find a video clip of a woman fingering herself. "Damn, this shit is weak," he commented on one. "Is she kidding me with this?"

I looked around the Applebee's, locked eyes with a pig-tailed little girl sitting a table over from us. The crust of an onion ring dangled from her bottom front teeth; she draped its stringy skeleton over the lip of a ketchup-stained plate. "I don't know, Lucas, it looks like she's trying her best?" I offered.

“Absolutely she ain’t,” he said, then closed the video.

Across the table, Ray and Zeke sat in their own little world. One full of laughter, with Zeke’s giggles helicoptering throughout the restaurant. It seemed that nothing had changed since high school. Although, now, Zeke drank. And he was drunk. And had been since 3 p.m., according to Lucas. It was a steady buzz.

But Ray’s smile was the same, his teeth that perfect touch of yellow I find attractive. They looked soft to the touch. Even now, I still remember him from high school: skinny arms wrapped tightly around Alyssa, anxious she might float away like a balloon. I lost minutes staring at him, at both of them, if I’m being honest, when they kissed in public. I spent too many school nights alone in my bedroom with my body pressed up against the standing mirror. I leaned in timidly, mimicking the way Alyssa would receive Ray’s kisses, until the cold glass warmed slick beneath my lips. This felt appropriate. Those early, nervous encounters between Ray and Alyssa were always so quick and stale, containing all the passion of a cold fish. I wish it stayed that way between them.

“Come on, man, let me have my phone,” Ray said. His cheeks were rosy from discount margarita mix. He extended his hand toward Zeke, who responded by tucking Ray’s iPhone into the breast pocket of his suit.

“Not gonna happen, Ray-ray,” Zeke said. “Can’t have you sneaking a Facetime session with Alyssa. It’s my job to keep an eye on you.”

“Yeah, Ray, one night apart won’t kill you,” I said, but when neither of them acknowledged my words, I returned to sipping a watery sangria through a cracked straw.

Then Lucas opened another video album on his phone. “Pay attention,” he said only to me, hitting the play button. In the video, a faceless woman stood in a shower, sat on the edge of a bathroom sink, plucked her right nipple with dental floss, and splayed herself out on a couch with a towel tucked underneath her ass. She played with herself for a while, her long-nailed fingers slipping in and out focus. Once she came, Lucas looked me right in the eyes and said, “See? That’s effort.”

I scratched my thumb. He shook his head at me and sucked his teeth. “What’s with you?” He opened another video, consuming each new megabyte of footage with Rottweiler hunger. Why did he come out tonight? Surely, he’d rather slobber over the screen, alone, and use the excess drool as lube. The thought of him rubbing himself raw underneath the table ballooned in my mind and the back of my neck felt hot. I returned to my sangria.

I knew going into the evening things would get awkward. More than six years had passed since I last saw either Lucas or Zeke, whose faces had hardened, though not in an unattractive way. I felt so boyish and soft seated next to them, as if all that time away had only held me back in their timelines. And then Ray—I wanted to keep it going, our friendship. I swear I tried. I learned of his engagement soon after I moved back to Cleveland and started working at the main branch of the library downtown. Not the research gig I wanted, but a solid job at the circulation desk. I saw their faces on my phone while eating a desk lunch. I had prayed on many drunken, lonely nights in college and the years right after for their relationship to fizzle out. All that wishing and hoping proven a waste of time and spirit when I saw their large smiles, the blindingly-white diamond. I never expected to receive an invite to the bachelor party. But, one day, Ray popped up in my DMs—“I’m getting married! Crazy, right? Saw you’re back in town and I want the whole gang back together!”—and what could I say but yes?



After dinner, we hit up a bar in Ohio City. Zeke ordered everyone a round of shots; he requested Jameson, which he called “an honest whiskey for true gentlemen.” The bartender set down four shot glasses. “What are you guys up to tonight?” His voice was softer than I expected.

“We’re here to celebrate our buddy Ray-ray’s final nights as a single man,” Zeke said. He adjusted the knot of his tie—he was the only one of us to dress up. “If the ladies ask, he’s no longer on the market.” And there it was again, Zeke’s laughter clanking around the room.

“Oh, I wouldn’t worry about any of that,” the bartender said, topping off the last shot. “It’s Boys’ Night. Won’t be a single woman in sight starting in about, oh, twenty minutes.”

“Man, what?” Lucas said. He stood, quickly, nearly knocking over two bar stools. “You didn’t say nothing about no Boy’s Night, Zeke, what kind of game you think we’re about to play?”

Whenever I’m overwhelmed with nerves, I feel my chest go concave, like a vacuum sucking me into another dimension. I can handle it, usually. It passes if I close my eyes, breathe. The real difficulty is with my hands—they flush cold and drip sweat. I gripped the bottom of my shirt to absorb the moisture and focused on Ray to see how he would handle the situation.

“Relax, big guy,” the bartender said without yelling. “I was joking. No Boys’ Night. It was a little joke is all.”

Lucas wiped his mouth with the back of his hand before sitting down again. “Cool, cool,” he said. “Better be.” He disappeared into his phone.

“Hey,” Ray said, taking his shot from the bartender. “Even if it was Boys’ Night, it’s not like we can’t hang. Turn on ‘Dancing Queen’ and you know I’ll be cutting it up with the rest of them.” This was the right response. Ray had always been a peacemaker, his presence an oasis from all the toxicity I grew up with at home. He laughed then and that made it O.K. for all of us to laugh.

The bartender, balling up a rag in his hands, rolled his eyes. No one else saw. It was a special moment between the two of us. I studied his face for a beat, perhaps a beat too long: his jawline was pronounced, and though his ears were perfect in size, one was blessed with an extra flap of skin sprouting from its lobe. Something clicked into place, then, and I felt that our two faces had exchanged this look before. That we had shared moments of understanding. Returning home was full of these brief encounters with former friends and newfound strangers, only this time there was nowhere to hide, no department store in the mall to slip into, no unfollow button to click.

“Can I get you guys anything else?” the bartender asked.

I requested another round of shots, smiling as I said the words, hoping that Ray might see me, that he would catch me planning out the next step in our night. It was so easy to recalibrate my senses. The bartender nodded, said he’d hook us up after helping another group farther down the bar. I continued to study his face, then his body, how he walked. When he was out of earshot I tapped Lucas on the shoulder and whispered, “Does the bartender look familiar to you?”

Lucas looked up from his phone. “So, what if he does?” He had opened his Snapchat, and with a tap of his thumb, a brief four-second video passed like a hiccup across his screen—what little I saw of the woman’s face resembled a willow tree.

“Just an observation,” I said, accepting a shot glass from Zeke. It felt sticky around the sides.

“I got an observation to make.” Lucas snarled, and I remembered a time when he cried during gym after taking too many volleyballs to the face. His crying was guttural, painful. An exaggeration. “You need to get some pussy tonight,” he finished. I blinked, searching his face for that little boy, my former friend.

“On that note,” Zeke cut in, “I think it’s about time we make a little toast. Tomorrow, Ray-ray, we say farewell to your life of being a loner. As you walk through the valley of the shadow of marriage, fear nothing, for your boys will always be around with a beer, a blunt, and a bulldozer to break you out of your matrimonial prison.” Lucas and Zeke laughed at an upsetting volume. They swallowed their shots sloppily and slammed the glasses down. I was confused about the whole thing: why so much kicking and screaming when it comes to marriage? Unless Ray didn’t want to marry Alyssa. Unless...there was hope.

Ray smiled and said nothing about the toast. He set down his shot glass, and a lovely daze melted his expression; the heaviness of his eyes held me in place. He pulled me in for a one-armed hug. “Justin, were you always this quiet?” The humidity inside the bar had bubbled up and Ray’s skin was sticky with sweat. It smelled strongly of him, slightly soured from a weak cologne, and musty, like a room without windows. Too much like home. I inhaled deeply for a second or two too long. Being this close to Ray reminded me of all those sleepovers at his house where I failed to ever sleep. All those nights spent on an air mattress at the side of his bed. That’s when we were at our closest. I reaped the benefits of being a guy, sharing an intimate space with him years before Alyssa ever could.

Ray jostled my shoulder a little. “Come on, man, nothing you want to add?” he said. “Or are you going to leave us hanging?”

“Oh, I don’t know if there’s anything I could add to”—I gestured toward Zeke—“I think all that needed to be said was said. And, speeches are kind of like masturbation, you know. Usually a solo thing.”

“Jesus, just say something about him and Alyssa, you fool.” Zeke said. He stood a good foot above my head, straightening his tie, but he wasn’t looking at any of us. He was eyeing his own reflection in the mirrored-wall behind the bar. Licking two of his fingers, he smoothed out both eyebrows; a dot of spit sparkled near his left temple.

The longer I sat in silence, the closer Ray and Zeke hovered. Alyssa was a friend once, too, I needed to remind myself. I was hard pressed to pull a good Alyssa story from my memory. We shared hand lotion in the back of 12 grade English, that was something. She would slide the excess from her hands over my palms, which I welcomed, greedily, imagining which parts of Ray’s body she had touched the night before.

“O.K.,” I started. The three of them leaned in. “I’m really glad you invited me out tonight, Ray. And that you and Alyssa have stuck it out. The two of you make a cute pair.” Impressed with my own lying abilities, I

allowed myself to pat Ray's hairy arm, enjoy its softness on my fingertips. And if it had been just the two of us, the rest of the night might have played out more pleasantly, but there was Zeke again, cutting in with a "Check this fag out."

And then Lucas: "That's what I've been saying, man. Real talk." His laughter was at a twenty now. I wanted it to be at a negative three. "When you're not getting the pussy you become one," he said. He and Zeke exchanged high-fives, the haunting sound of flesh against flesh. Zeke broke off into a little step-routine from his fraternity days at Akron University and palmed wildly at this thigh; he slammed each foot down with such intent I worried the tile would crack. Finished, he threw his head back and howled, stopping only when he exchanged eye contact with a red-headed woman sitting in front of a window. Other nearby women gasped. One said, "Ugh."

And Ray: he was cheesing, all teeth. This was not the right reaction. I felt an ache in my chest, a squeeze—after all this time, how stupid I was to keep pining after him, if only in my head, to continue fantasizing that Ray was mine.

"Come on, Zeke, really?"

“Here he goes,” Lucas said to Zeke. “I warned y’all, didn’t I? Homeboy acts like he wasn’t talking mad shit himself every damn day through graduation.”

I remembered the bartender then, felt a pull come from the other end of the bar. A sense that I should apologize for my former friends, their behavior, for a potential slight from the past, began to weave its way through my heart, but I was convinced that, even if I was once the shitty guy Lucas remembered, I was never as bad as them. I had left the state and met new, wonderful people who opened up the world beyond the four of us. I must have been better.

“Guys, guys, guys,” Ray said, “this is my party and you’re really bringing me down.” I slid out from under Ray’s arm. I hated how cold my neck got now that it was free. Ray stood, threw one arm each around Zeke and Lucas. The three of them appeared before me like giants, an impenetrable wall.

“You need to let Justin know then. Because he ain’t better than us.” Lucas turned to me. “Got that? You ain’t better than us.”

“Have another drink,” Zeke said to Lucas. “It’ll be chill.”

I turned away from them and faced the bar. Ray returned to the stool next to mine. I glanced up at the mirror and caught Zeke leaning closer to Lucas, mumbling, his hand placed firmly on Lucas's chest to keep him from reaching forward and dragging me to the floor. If we fought, he'd win, but I would fight dirty. I could feel it in my fingertips, an itch to tear at his face. I folded my hands to calm them, and when my adrenaline lowered, I heard that word again: fag. A one-two punch of a word, but at least in the privacy of my invisible gay life, I tried to pretend like it would never hurt me. And anyway, I wasn't concerned about my own faggotry. After all, how could they really know for sure? It was the bartender. I got a vibe. I checked over my shoulder to find him snapping an orange peel against the edge of a highball glass. The festive lighting accentuated the slight crook in his nose and the fullness of his eyebrows, his cheeks and lips so soft-looking I desired a kiss. Leaning closer to the bar, I tried to block out everything about Lucas, who had shifted gears and starting making small talk with the red-headed woman, and Zeke, who was dabbing at a spot of Jameson on his tie. And even Ray, both elbows on the bar, his back arched, unfazed by their vulgar behavior. I pictured all of them in another scene, another place, so I could observe the bartender, how at home he seemed.

When the bartender reappeared, I yelled my order—a Manhattan—too loudly. He laughed, said, “You got it.” After stirring the bitters, sweet vermouth and whiskey together, he poured the contents into an icy glass and dropped in a cherry, which broke gracelessly through the drink’s mahogany surface, sinking to the bottom. He pushed the cocktail forward. I allowed my hand to land on his for a second or two, and when there was no sign that either of us would be the first to pull away, I made direct eye contact. So strange and exciting to observe the watery nature of someone else’s eyes, and to show them yours, dry and red-veined, as I’m sure mine were. My eyes have always lacked significant lubrication. Too many hours spent reading and staring at screens, following past timelines in real time. Locked in his line of vision, I felt a growing burn in my chest that we truly did know each other. I opened my mouth to ask if he remembered me, but Zeke slapped me on the shoulder, jerking me forward. The reality of the evening rushed back to me: Ray. I was here for Ray, at least for tonight. Not this familiar stranger, who was gone when I lifted my head.



Lucas's red-headed acquaintance, we learned, is named Maeve. She lured us to another bar that was much darker than the first. We drank low-priced margaritas with tequila levels so high the following morning would involve a hangover, the kind that limps around the stomach like a bloated worm. I was dazzled by the boldness of Maeve's hair, the same fire-engine red I dyed my own hair back in college. I immediately regretted the decision and went to a barber the next morning for a buzz cut; the red locks fell to the floor like confetti. For Maeve, the color was stunning. And maybe the drinks were hitting harder at that point, because I admired how easily she worked her way into the group. I envied her for it, for one or two seconds, then it disappeared.

Maeve spoke to the other guys about her history with using voodoo dolls to manipulate her twin brother into committing heinous acts for fun. She liked to get revenge and use him as a medium for execution. I don't believe in the supernatural; my attention dipped, then circled back to the bartender. I tried to refocus on Ray, reminded myself he was the reason I came out tonight, but across the table, Ray faded deeper into a drunken stupor, his head rolling back and forth on his shoulders. Looking at him no longer sparked joy. To avoid falling into the sadness of feeling drunk and alone, I focused instead on Lucas's hands, his fingers. I imagined him

inserting one inside of me, brushing the tip of my nipple with the pasty stump of a thumb. I frowned at the unerotic possibility of such an encounter and realized with confidence that if Lucas were soliciting sloppy photos and dirty talk from me on Snapchat, I wouldn't push out my A-game either.

Maeve revealed her method for carving out the genitalia of voodoo dolls and Ray, who had been teetering in his seat, bolted from the table. He stumbled into the bathroom around the corner from my chair. We could hear his share of the nacho platter water-falling into a toilet bowl.

Zeke checked his watch nervously, not at all soberly. "It's not even one yet. Too early for him to be caving right now like a punk." He tilted forward, rested his head on his left shoulder.

"How are you still standing at all?" I asked. He belched in response.

"Just calling it now," Lucas said. "I'm not going to be the one to carry Ray back to the car." He said this while picking at the nacho debris, scraping at a chunk of solidified cheese and jalapeño with a nail.

"Why don't we have a little fun with him?" Maeve said, rising from her chair and slipping onto Lucas's lap.

There were whispers of a plan, one I was not able to hear, until Zeke finally yelled out, “Maeve, you’re a genius!”

“Listen,” he slurred, “our friend needs us, O.K.? Let’s go pay Ray-ray a visit in the shitter and, uh, snap a few photos.” He held onto the last syllable like a soccer commentator.

We found Ray in a puddle of limbs and sweat at the base of the toilet. He clutched his neck as if all that heaving risked decapitation. “Ugh.” he mumbled. “God, no.” A red lightbulb swung two feet above his head casting a glow on the walls and mirror, highlighting an obscene amount of Satanic graffiti.

“We should probably collect him,” I said. “You know, get him home?” The night could end right there as far as I was concerned. I prayed for a last call, for the lights to turn up and wash us all in harsh yellows.

“I know what to do,” Maeve said. She pushed past me and closed the lid of the toilet. Ray flopped onto his side, against the tiled wall. “A little help, guys?” Maeve asked, dragging Ray closer to her. With Lucas’s help, they hoisted Ray onto Maeve’s lap; she cradled him like a baby, his head falling down into her chest. Maeve then lowered her top, freeing one of her nipples. They looked like Madonna and child.

“Here, you can use my phone,” Zeke said. His face was doughy now after pounding too many cocktails. Once the phone was in my possession, he wedged himself deeper into the bathroom, down onto the small floorspace next to Ray. At some point in the phone exchange, Lucas managed to fit himself into the tight space, too, and sat behind Maeve on his toilet tank throne.

“Come on, take the picture, dude,” Lucas said. His eyes widened and he pointed to Maeve with his chin. The sooner we finished up here, the sooner the two of them could go off somewhere to screw. Lucas seemed to be living his life the way everyone else around me did. Coworkers and classmates, from Cleveland to Syracuse: everyone chasing the next fuck, stitching together love from such reckless connections. I kept my heart protected for so long and it led me to this bathroom. I looked down at pathetic Ray, wondering how different this night would be, if it would exist at all, if I ever told him how in love—we can call it love—with him I was back in high school. If there was a small chance he might have felt the same way, too.

“Come on, my legs are falling asleep here. Take the picture.” Maeve yelled.

I believed I was holding Zeke's phone. Before opening the camera, I saw the background image: Alyssa and Ray, the two of them hugging behind a large, red birthday cake. A glob of frosting on Alyssa's nose, her entire face speckled with it. Ray's eyes almost gone from so much laughing. Both of them, mostly Alyssa, beaming like they had nothing else to live for but that moment. And the grin on her face, so sharp and cruel, mocking me now as she had years ago. At the after-prom, our senior year, a bad mix of Southern Comfort and Four Loko left me wobbly and too honest. Alyssa and I had been looking at a photo of her and Ray from the dance, and she asked me if it wasn't the cutest photo I had ever seen. Actually, what she said was, "This shit is cute as fuck, right?" And I said, "No, no, let me show you." After fumbling for quite some time, I pulled up a picture of Ray, Lucas, Zeke and me from our limo ride to Alyssa's house. I covered up Zeke's and Lucas's faces with my thumbs, told her *this* shit was the cutest. I suppose I could blame my decision to come out to her on cheap alcohol and junk food. Throughout high school, I believed if Alyssa ever uncovered my desires, she would slap me, maybe even call me names, which would have been awful enough, but instead she laughed, nearly a bark, right in my face. "Justin, Justin, don't be ridiculous," she said. "Don't joke like that, what the fuck? Ray ain't gay." And I laughed back, tried to

play it off, but a line had been crossed. She looked at me with a side-eye and attached herself to Ray, a cloak on his thin frame, for the rest of the night.

In the bathroom, I snapped a photo, then another. I stopped after the guys asked for a third. I suggested both Lucas and Zeke leave so I could get one with Maeve and the groom-to-be. Something passed over Lucas's eyes on his way out of the bathroom and he hesitated for a second, not stumbling out like Zeke. But whatever was on his mind didn't keep him too long. He squeezed past me, patting my back.

In the picture I took of just Ray and Maeve, Maeve's smile rivaled Alyssa's. I gave no thought to what came next—I sent it to Alyssa.

I joined the other guys outside the bathroom and said nothing as I tucked the phone back into Zeke's front pocket. He cocked his head at me like a confused bird, his hair just as feathered. Gone was the bowl haircut from junior high. Gone was the acne and the guy who once stayed home from school for three days in the 7th grade because his girlfriend dumped him in a note. He blinked and then the night's goals must have re-consumed him. "Another drink," he declared to the group. Together, Lucas and Maeve shared the weight of Ray in their walk toward the bar. Ray's eyes were half-closed, narrow slits in which might have existed a drop of

recognition. I watched the four of them overwhelm a short bartender with tropical drink orders and another demand for whiskey shots. Everything as it was. Like nothing significant had happened at all. Perfect timing to make an exit.



I walked for a bit, my drunkenness dragging me down. Every foot step vibrated up my shin to the top of my knee. Any movement occurred both slowly and quickly, like I was existing between segments of time, trying to hold on to what came before and what was to come. I walked in this topsy-turvy manner for three blocks or so before I stopped to rest my shoulder against a brick wall.

A man, also leaning against the cold bricks, stood a foot away, smoking a cigarette. He extended it toward me, but I waved it off. I wanted to save all the moisture in my mouth.

“Never understood how you hung out with those guys,” he said, taking an incredibly long drag. For a moment I believed this man might save me. I asked him if he was God.

“I’ve gotten ‘Adonis’ before, but never a flat-out ‘God.’ I dig it.” His head bobbed as he spoke, though not in a drunken way. He laughed, too, the soft, velvety chuckle of a man who knew more than he was letting on. There was enough light from a streetlamp cutting across the both of us for me to recognize an extra fold of skin on his ear.

“Wait, I know you.”

“Ah, so you do. Thought you were looking at me funny.” A few people passed by in groups of six and eight, all of them laughing. There was a bachelorette party across the street; all the women wore plastic penis necklaces, the bride in a hot pink veil. “You stare like no other,” he said. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell your homeboys or anything like that.”

I was the level of wasted where moments ago felt like last week. At some point, during my walk, the memory of my so-called friends began to blur into brown. All that mattered was the bartender standing in front of me. “Wait, though, so you remember me?”

“Remembered your friends first, to be truthful. That guy Zeke was always kind of a shit. But then I saw your face and I realized who you were. Man, oh man, if anyone from school had told me one day Justin Figueroa would be checking me out in a bar.” He tucked his hands into his pockets

and inched closer to me. I flinched. He paused, stepped back. “Yeah, anyway,” he said, peeling himself now completely from the wall. He flicked the cigarette out onto the street. “Guess I wasn’t much on your radar back then.”

“Oh, God, I wasn’t a shit to you or anything, was I?”

He laughed, hard, from deep inside of his gut. “Oh, Justin.” Then he folded his arms and smirked at me. “Not at all. You were one of the good ones. One might say, damn near perfect.” He stepped closer and this time I didn’t move. He raised his hand to my chin, stroked the stubble and leaned in, close enough to kiss. “The name’s Xavier,” he said, and then pulled back.

I swallowed hard and fiddled with the bottom of my shirt. “Xavier,” I repeated. “I’m so happy I ran into you.”

We chatted some more, the two of us standing outside a bar like two friends. It felt like the right way to end this night.

He asked if I should be getting back to the other guys after we had been standing for quite some time, long enough for him to almost miss the end of his shift. It must have been after 2 a.m.—the bars around us would be closing soon. I fumbled over myself to retrieve my phone, which had

been on silent the whole night. Since leaving the bar, I had received eight missed calls, three voicemails, twenty-seven text messages, and a Snapchat request from a user named RaveGirlMaeve39. My eyes watered from the bright screen. Xavier asked if everything was alright and I was quite sure nothing could ever be alright again. But the night would roll on. Tomorrow, another day. These are the things I told myself. I slipped the phone back into my pocket and asked, “Do you live close by?”



“There’s not much in the way of food here, so if you’re hungry we may have to order in. I think Nunzio’s is still open. And I’m sure I got some booze around if you just want to drink.” The fridge door opened and closed; Xavier rummaged through a cabinet over the sink. I tucked my knees to my chest and tried to concentrate on the sounds of his apartment: his movements, the whirr of his heater, the blood whooshing in my head, the meow-like flush of a toilet downstairs.

Xavier emerged from the kitchen with two glasses of a frothy white liquid, speckled with brown. “Coquito?” he offered. “It may be a year or so old, but alcohol doesn’t really go bad.”

I sipped the coquito, refusing to top off my night of heavy drinking with a glass of sugar. Xavier chugged his serving, pulling the glass from his lips to reveal a fleck of coconut saluting out from his gums.

“Cute,” I said. A childhood of watching romcoms in the privacy of my bedroom had a greater effect on me than I wanted—*of course* my dialogue was destined to be cheesy. What was I supposed to do? He smiled. Then wiped away the foamy mustache from his upper lip and stroked my chin with the same hand.

Then, without any of my usual complicated thinking, we were kissing.

I had spent all of college worrying that when I finally got to kiss a guy, Ray would still be heavy on my mind, like some permanent dent in my head. So many years of thinking about him, of hoping I might be with him, all those ways I had stretched to fit into his world. But maybe it’s possible I actually was better than all that. Better than that guy I stowed away. Better than the group of friends I once thought I belonged to, but never truly did, who were growing increasingly sloppy and drunk in a city

that once felt like home. Fuck it: Let Alyssa get mad at Ray. Let them experience a shift, a fracture, that comes with seeing something outside your own reality.

When Xavier broke our kiss, he was shirtless and I was kicking off my boxers. He reached down to grab my pants from the floor, which he held momentarily, giggling. “Let’s go out to my balcony,” he said, and before waiting for him to stand I was at the sliding glass door, my hand eager to pull it open, to get outside.

The kissing continued. Xavier’s long fingers traced along the edge of my shoulders and arms, pausing somewhere at the base of my stomach. He gripped me tightly around my waist, quite hard, possibly bruising me, and when I winced, he switched to my shirt, which he yanked over my head and tossed back into his living room where the rest of my clothes lay scattered.

Completely naked, I stood on the balcony reaching hungrily for Xavier’s belt. But he retreated, stepping back over the threshold. He lingered in the doorway, the tufts of hair on his chest tickled by a breeze swooping in between us.

“Wait,” he said, “I just gotta look at you.” I tried to smile at him flirtatiously; bit my bottom lip and focused on squinting my eyes just

enough, the way I had seen Lucas do in a number of his Instagram selfies. Xavier pulled a phone from his back pocket and pointed it at me. “May I get a photo of this night?”

I laughed, folding my arms. There were parts of my body no one had seen before tonight. But when Xavier asked again, saying “Please?” I thought, what the hell? I struck a pose, the sexiest one I knew.

He snapped the photo then lowered the phone, tapping several buttons. I thought he was saving it. He continued for a second or two longer. “You know, I’ve never been able to forget you all these years,” he said, the phone still bright on his face.

I teared up a bit. It was silly, I know. But someone was thinking about me for once. Someone was choosing to fit me into their memories. Maybe coming back home was the right thing to do.

Xavier smiled again. “To be truthful about it,” he said, “I thought about you a lot in school. And for years after. You were, how should I say this?”—he drummed his fingers along the phone—“An absolute monster.” His laugh flopped out, all the warmth stripped away. Although I didn’t try, I felt I wouldn’t be able to walk. One foot in front of the other, a concept that now seemed foreign to my body.

“You won’t remember this at all, now will you, Justin? But I recall you saying some shit to Ray about me once.” A tree rustled in the backyard, the swishing leaves sounding like rain. I was twelve, or maybe thirteen when I started to feel for Ray, thinking and dreaming about him whenever we were apart. Lucas once asked why I spent every gym class staring at Ray. I had been trying to catch sight of his dick flapping inside the fabric of his sweatpants. But I wasn’t the only one, and as Xavier spoke, it all came back. “You were just making sure I didn’t do anything gay, huh, Justin? Worried that faggy Xavier might try something with him, and you were just looking out, right? Your boys may be scum, Justin, but so are you.”

The phone hit my chest harder than I expected. I fell to the floor, extending my hand to catch it before it could shatter on the porch. Xavier was standing in the doorway until he wasn’t anymore—quick, like a camera flash. Then, the door slid back into place. The lock clicked, and the blinds were pulled back to their starting position, the individual slats turning to face inward, blocking me out. I screamed Xavier’s name, once or twice, then the living room lights went out. It was so cold. I moved about the porch in search of another entrance to the house. There were steps descending into the backyard, but I needed my clothes. I thought about pressing my forehead up against the window when the phone buzzed to

life in my hand, a nonstop stream of vibrations, icons popping up on the screen like threats from an alien world. I looked down, unlocked the screen—the background photo: Ray and me, both of us doubled over with laughter at Edgewater Park, a small fire glowing next to us. I was so cold now, and lonely. I thumbed open my text messages and saw that Xavier had sent the photo to Ray, and Lucas, and Zeke. My finger slipped and the photo filled the entirety of the screen. I thought I was being sexy. The phone rang again, the vibrations burning my palm, and I answered without thinking, but I couldn't focus on the words being spoken to me, or about me in the background, I could only see my dumb, cartoonish face from the photo. And it was Ray, I was talking to Ray, who was yelling, slurring, and I wanted to tell him I was sorry, that I loved him, I've always loved him, but there was too much noise, and it was so cold, and the night was sinking away from me, and there's no way anyone would recognize me in that photo unless they were looking hard enough. I got it now. My lips were parted, eyes glazed over. I was gripping my penis in one hand, mid-stroke, and popping my ass out, cupping it with the other hand. I put in so much effort. I went for it. I gave everything I had.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christopher Gonzalez is a fiction editor at Barrelhouse and a contributing editor at Split Lip. His writing appears or is forthcoming in The Forge, The Nation, Forward: 21st Century Flash Fiction, Lunch Ticket, Wasafiri, and elsewhere. He lives in Brooklyn, NY and on Twitter: [@livesinpages](#).

LF #139

© 2020 Christopher Gonzalez. Published by [LITTLE FICTION](#) | [BIG TRUTHS](#), April 2020. Edited by Beth Gilstrap. Cover design by Troy Palmer, using images from [The Noun Project](#) (credits: Chris).

Read more stories at [littlefiction.com](#)