

Leather and Something Like Infidelity

by Anthony M. Powers

Are we dating? I have no idea. She's kind of always acted like we're together even when we're not. I guess some things never change, but still it's been especially bad tonight. I knew I shouldn't have kissed her last week. Or three days ago. Or the day after that.

"Fuck," I say to myself.

Maybe it's just in my head. Maybe it's just because it's summer and she's lonely because she's not seeing anybody like she usually is. Then again maybe it's not. Those looks she's been giving me across the table, the way she asked to bum a cigarette—all these stupid, little fucked up things that shouldn't matter—that probably don't matter—are all I can think about. She always gives me this look like she knows even after all this time, all the times we stabbed each other in the back only to fall in love with each other again, over and over for years, that I can't get her out of my head.

You could say that we have a bit of a history.

She needs to stop looking at me like that.

"Fuck."

The bathroom door opens, and I'm not sure how long I've been standing at the sink, staring at the mirror. I quickly turn on the faucet and wash my hands for the second time. I don't look up at whoever opened the door, but I can feel his eyes digging into the back of my head as he walks to the urinal. I flick water from my hands into the sink then wipe them on my jeans before exiting the bathroom as swiftly as possible.

It's Friday night and the bars along Lorain Avenue in West Park are pretty much business as usual. The West Park Station—one of our usual neighborhood spots—was only opened within the past few years. I think it used to be a tailor and adjacent hair salon, but I can't remember. The fact that bars are the only businesses that

manage to stay open in our little slice of Cleveland is a testament to West Park's Irish Catholic roots, not to mention that most of the male population in the neighborhood over the age of 25 is police or firemen. A group of firemen actually own The Station, hence the name. It's a pretty nice place, but nothing too special as far as bars go.

I make myself a path through the crowded room back to where I'd left Alex and Jack. I'm surprised I managed to talk them into coming out tonight, considering Jack has work tomorrow and Alex doesn't like drinking in our neighborhood because she lives half an hour away. It's probably because I'm leaving tomorrow to go on a road trip with my dad and I won't be back until next week. Realizing this, I can't help but smile: it's nice to know your friends care that you won't be around. Alex says she'll miss me while I'm gone. I already know I'll miss her, too, but I really wish I didn't.

I get back to the table where my friends had been sitting. My half-empty beer bottle is still there, but Alex and Jack are gone. Not missing a beat, I grab my beer and figure they're out on the front patio, smoking. I have to walk dangerously close to the dance floor to get outside. I've never been too fond of getting anywhere near that dance floor, but as usual I didn't have much choice. As I get to the door, someone from behind me grabs my arm and I lurch backwards. Things like this always happen to me, but only god knows why.

"Hey, kid," a voice says. A tan, slightly wrinkled hand decorated with long, fake fingernails and a gaudy diamond ring is clutching the sleeve of my leather jacket. My eyes run up the unsleeved arm and past an almost exposed bosom to the face of its owner—a woman, at least in her mid-forties, with dyed red hair and bright pink lips. She's standing with a group of her middle-aged, overweight friends on the dance floor. They rock and sway as much as their bodies will allow, resembling barges in a stormy harbor. Even by my standards, I wouldn't consider what they're doing dancing, and I'm an average, white male—dancing isn't exactly my expertise. These women are all

giggling like they're 14 years old and dressed like they're 19. I scan their eyes and can tell they're all drunk.

You can always see it in their eyes.

Part of me feels like a wounded animal surrounded by hungry cougars. Another part of me feels like being mauled by a cougar might not be that bad. A third part of me wishes he could punch the second part of me in the face.

"Can I help you?" I ask. My first inclination is that they probably know my mom, so I should be polite. Plus I'm nowhere near drunk enough to pretend to flirt with these women or even to tell them to fuck off.

"Are you old enough to be here?" the woman slurs.

"Excuse me?!" I ask. Her friends erupt in laughter like a pack of walruses during feeding time at Sea World.

"I wanna see your I.D.," she says.

"You can't be serious."

"Let me see it!" she demands. I look behind me and sure enough the bouncer has noticed that there may be a confrontation brewing. Knowing full well I won't be able to talk myself out of either being thrown out, beat up, or both, I decide it's best to just humor the woman.

"Alright, alright," I say. I take my I.D. from my wallet and thrust it at her. "Here."

She holds the little slip of plastic close to her face, then slowly pulls it away. Her friends pipe down. She squints at me hard. Then at the I.D. Then at me. The I.D. Me. She scoffs and hands the I.D. back to me. Without another word, she turns back to her friends, who start laughing again. I shove it in my pocket and turn to leave again. I hear them talk about me as I walk away.

"I can't believe you actually did it," one of them says.

"Ha, 21. He sure shut me up," the woman says. They all start laughing.

What does that even mean anyways? Was it suddenly "uncool" to be 21? Who the fuck do these women think they are? I don't look

THAT young, do I? So what if I do? Why should I care what a bunch of old manatees think?

I take a long drink from my beer to shut myself up.

I finally get outside to the front patio. Jack and Alex are sitting at a table in the corner and neither of them is smoking. It must have taken me too long to get outside. Damn. Now I'm either going to have to wait to smoke until the next time someone wanted a cig or risk being by myself, which seems like a bad idea at this point given what just happened inside. As I approach the table, I see that there's someone sitting with them. It's a woman, blonde, slightly heavy-set. I can't tell much else yet because she's sitting with her back to me. They don't look like they're in a hurry to get back inside, so I take out my cigarettes as I walk to the table. The three of them break off their conversation and focus on me while I light up and shove the pack into my pocket.

"Well that took long enough," Alex says sarcastically. She keeps eye contact with me as she takes a sip of her rum and Diet Coke. Her eyes are dark and hypnotic. Even at 21 years old, I still feel like I'm 15 when she looks at me like that. She puts down her glass and licks her lips. She knows I'm looking. I don't know if I want to kiss her or if I want to set her on fire.

"Yeah, dude," Jack says, "for a second there thought you might be getting a little something-something in the bathroom." Alex's eyes slyly pop at me. She smiles a little.

"A, in what alternate universe do things like that happen to me," I say. "And B, if I was getting with somebody in a bar bathroom, it probably wouldn't have taken that long." Jack laughs drunkenly. We've been friends since high school and he's used to my self-deprecating jokes.

We were the only ones from our group of friends to stay in Ohio after graduation (even though I went away to college in southern Ohio and he went to EMT school in Cleveland), we were the only ones with tattoos (although mine paled in comparison to his, which included a half sleeve, a Jack of Hearts taking up most of his side, and a chest piece which as of now is still in the works), and we lived

two blocks away from each other. Whenever I came back home, I usually spent most of my time at Jack's house with him and his roommate Mike. Our drinking habits would put most A.A. members to shame.

Jack's the closest thing to a brother I've ever had.

"Anthony, this is our new friend, Tina," Alex says. "Tina, Anthony."

"Nice to meet you," I say with my cigarette hanging from my lips, my arm stretched toward her.

"So are you boys in a band or something?" she asks me, shaking my hand. I don't know what it is about me that makes me look like a musician, but this is not the first time I've been asked a question like this for no apparent reason during unrelated circumstances. Unless Jack and Alex had been talking to her about music before I got here. From the look on Jack's face, however, this seems to be as much of a pop quiz to him as it is to me.

"You could say that, I guess," I say. It's not quite a lie, but it's not quite the truth either. Earlier that night, Alex, Jack, and I had talked about starting a rockabilly band for fun. Jack had been playing drums for about 2 years now and Alex had played bass for as long as I'd known her. As for me, I'd been playing guitar since the 7th grade and singing since I could talk. So feasibly, yeah. I told her the truth.

"I was just telling your friends," Tina says, "ya'll have got to come with me across the street. You kids could maybe play there some night."

"Where?" I ask.

"Schmedley's, dude," says Jack cutting in, a devious grin on his face. I'm not sure what my expression is, but I'm sure that it's a clear indication of the shock and worry currently taking root in my thoughts. Tina doesn't notice. She's already gathering her things together, which include her purse, a pack of Marlboro Reds, and a half empty bottle of Budweiser.

"I'm gonna run to the little girls room, then we're heading over," she says. She motions to Alex. "C'mon, honey." Without a response, Tina is already on her way inside. Alex shrugs at us and follows her. I'll never understand why women can't go to the bathroom alone.

I wait for them to go inside and then turn to Jack to give him my usual what-the-fuck-are-you-thinking look. He just grins as he lights a cigarette.

"Seriously, Jack? Schmedley's? The biker bar?"

"Yeah, dude."

"We can't go in there! We'll get our asses kicked! I mean look at us!" Jack looks himself over. He's wearing a pair of olive corduroy pants he's turned into shorts, a pair of tattered basketball shoes, a knit cap, and a t-shirt that says "As Seen in Porn." He looks at me, wearing what I normally wear: a plain t-shirt, jeans, Chuck Taylors, and a jacket.

"You got the leather jacket, dude. We'll be fine," he says.

In my head, I scramble to think of any other reason not to go. Between my jacket and his sleeve of tattoos, we probably would be fine as long as we stayed on our toes. But I really didn't want to go over there.

"Dude, you know how I told you things were kind of happening with Alex again?" I ask already knowing the answer. I'd only told him right before we went out.

"So?"

"So what if something does go down and I completely get my ass handed to me? How is that gonna look to her?"

Jack shakes his head a little at me, knowing not only that the chances of us getting in an actual fight were slim to none, but also that the chances of me actually caring about what anybody thought—even Alex—were even less. Improv was never my strong suit. Jack puts his arm around my shoulder like he's my big brother, which is kind of ridiculous considering even though he's older than I am (by only a week), I've always been the mature voice of reason between the two of us.

"Listen, buddy. This Tina chick is pretty cool. She says she used to work over there, so I'm sure everything'll be fine."

Before I can protest, Alex and Tina walk out the door.

"Let's go, boys," Tina says, beckoning us with the hand that's still holding her beer bottle. Tina keeps walking and Alex is right on her

heels. Jack pats me on the back and follows before I can say anything else.

"Goddamnit," I say. I hurry to catch up with Jack.

We cross the street towards Schmedley's. Tina still has her beer in her hand. She takes a swig and tosses it in the gutter. She says something to Alex that I can't hear, and Alex laughs. Tina playfully pushes her. Alex glances over her shoulder at me for a moment, still smiling. I smile back on instinct and automatically hate myself for it, because I know that if she knows she has some kind of hold on me again, it's only a matter of time before she gets bored. Like she always does. Like she probably always will. I take a final drag of my cigarette and flick it down at the street.

A row of Harley Davidson motorcycles takes up most of the parking spots on the street in front of the bar. At least I assume that's what they are. I don't know anything about motorcycles.

The bouncer outside of Schmedley's is a bear of a man wearing an American flag bandana and a leather vest. He stands with his arms crossed in front of the door.

"Hey Earl," Tina says. "The kids are with me."

"They got I.D.s?" Earl asks.

"C'mon, Earl," Tina says, "do they look like they're under 21?"

I think back to that bitch at the other bar and I hear myself gulp.

Without a word, he steps to the side and lets us pass. The door opens and I'm hit by a wall of sound. Tina pats Earl on the shoulder and he in return smirks a smile at us as we walk by him one by one. I'm the last one in and I think I hear Earl chuckling under his breath, but it could just be my imagination.

We're gonna die. I just know it. I've seen too many horror movies and read too many Stephen King novels not to know that this is the perfect set up for a massacre. This reminds me of that movie with George Clooney and Quentin Tarantino where they go to that biker bar slash strip club in Mexico and most of the patrons turn into vampires. There's no way I'm making it out of here in one piece.

If I was ever going to find God again, this was the fucking time to keep an eye out for him.

We walk into the bar and the place is packed. There's a band playing grungy classic rock songs while a crowd of people dance in front of the stage. Not a soul in the place is without a bottle in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other.

Just as I realize that we're definitely the youngest people in this place, we walk past the dance floor and Jack is stopped by a woman who starts to grind on him. She's wearing a black tank top and jean shorts. She must be at least in her 70s. She has a cane in one hand. And she's grinding her ass on Jack's crotch.

Jack looks back at me, trying to laugh it off. He's playing along. I can tell he's terrified. He dances with her for a minute, before quickly taking a step away. I walk closely behind him. Before we catch up to Alex and Tina, I grab him by the shoulder.

"Told you," I yell into his ear. He looks back at me and shrugs.

"What do you boys want to drink?" Tina asks.

"Whiskey and Cokes," Jack tells her, pointing at himself and then at me.

Tina walks behind the bar and leans into the burly looking bartender. She whispers something in his ear and he looks over at us. Oh god, this is the part where they take us in the back to show us their private lounge for special customers only and drink our blood.

The two of them walk back and forth behind the bar making drinks. When they finish, Tina leads him over to us.

"Alex, Jack, Anthony, this is Nick. He owns the place." They hand around the drinks and Nick shakes each of our hands. He looks a lot like the bouncer outside, but to be fair over half the guys in here look pretty much the same. Given my knowledge of biker gangs from watching the History Channel, it kind of makes sense. I go for my wallet but Nick stops me.

"On me. Pleasure to meet you guys," Nick says. "So Tina here tells me you're in a band?"

"Well if you wanna talk music, this guy is really the one to talk to," Jack says bumping me in my ribs with his elbow. I chuckle embarrassedly.

"You could say that, I guess," I say.

"Well you should go on up there and play something," Nick says.

Confused, I open my mouth to respond, but am not quite sure how to. Nick laughs.

"It's open mic night, kid," he says. "Anyone can play."

"Well, I mean, there's a band up there right no—"

"That's not a band, those are just guys who play here every week."

"Wait... what?"

"Yeah, anyone can play who wants to play. It's just a bunch of guys who kinda take shifts playing with each other."

"Well, that sounds pretty cool, but I mean I don't have my guitar with me or anything so—"

"Most of those guys up there aren't playing their own instruments. People just bring shit and play together."

I look up at the stage and back at Nick. I've never heard of anything like that really happening before. I can't help but smile at the prospect of a bunch of random musicians coming together to smoke, drink, and have fun playing music together. I quickly realize that this isn't hell—it's something like heaven.

"Really?" I ask.

"Yeah!" Nick says, slapping me on the arm. I try not to wince. "Well if not tonight maybe next time. If you'll excuse me..." With that, he walks back behind the bar and continues serving drinks.

"Cheers!" Tina says, raising her beer. We raise our glasses and drink. I take a big gulp and when I'm done, Tina's halfway to the other end of the bar talking to someone else.

"Crazy shit," I say, shaking my head in disbelief. Alex nods in agreement. Jack looks away for a second and Alex winks at me. Something jumps up into my throat, and I'm not sure if it's my heart or what I had for lunch.

"Pool?" Jack asks. I hadn't even noticed, but we were standing next to a pool table where a couple of older looking bikers were just finishing up a game.

"Sure."

"I'll be back," Alex says. She walks towards a well-lit doorway I assume leads to the bathrooms. I watch her hips sway as she fades into the crowd. Once again, she knows I'm watching. I turn back to Jack, but he's on the other side of the pool table talking to the two guys who've just finished playing. Probably checking to see if they're done with the table. I nervously light a cigarette and finish my drink. Even with the amiable nature of the bar patrons as well as its owner, I can't help shake the feeling that something's just not right with this place.

Jack walks back to me a couple minutes later.

"They wanna play us," he says.

"Is that a good idea?" I ask.

"I don't know, dude. I guess we'll see."

"I'm gonna need another drink first."

"Alright, you get this round and I'll get the game going."

I walk to the bar and order the three of us another round. This time Nick lets me pay. As he sets down the last drink, Jack's arm appears over my shoulder and grabs one. I pick up the other two and turn to him.

"Let's do this, kid," he says. I set Alex's drink down on a table nearby and finish half of mine before setting it down, too.

We play better than expected, actually winning and knocking the bikers off the table. Afterwards, we shake hands with them. One of the guys introduces himself to us as "Wizard" and informs us that he wants next game.

"We're just gonna play one against each other, then it's all you, man," Jack says.

I go to the table where I left my drink and Alex's is still sitting there, untouched. I look around the bar and finally spot her standing near the bathrooms talking to a large, muscular biker. He's standing close to her. Too close. She's smiling and laughing.

I feel anger burning up my spine, a temper I don't feel very often anymore. It's something I've inherited, something I've had to try for years to control. Something that's gotten me picked on and beat up since the second grade. Mom used to say I got my temper from my

dad, but now she just tells me that I'm exactly like him. Alex is one of the few people in my adult life who is still able to make me feel a sort of rage like this over seemingly inconsequential circumstances. It'll probably always be that way. I'm about to start twitching when Jack slaps me on the back, bringing me back to reality.

"Set it up, dude. I'll get us more drinks," he says.

I look over at Alex, then back at him.

"Well, don't worry about her," I say.

"Same to you, bud." He turns and walks towards the bar.

"Jack!" I stop him and he turns. "Beers and shots this time."

"I like your thinking," he says, snapping his fingers and pointing at me.

I finish my drink and walk back to the pool table. I thumb six quarters into the coin slot on the table and push the ball release button.

Nothing happens.

I push the button a few more times, somewhat frantically. Don't embarrass yourself, man. Not here. Not now. I kneel down and reach my arm into the slot where the balls come out, but don't feel anything. So I reach my arm in deeper.

Still nothing.

I go to pull my arm from the slot and it won't come out.

"No way," I mutter to myself.

I try to jerk my arm free, but my wrist is caught on something and it won't budge.

I'm on my knees, trapped up to my elbow in a pool table. It reminds me of Indiana Jones; this place definitely may turn out to be a Temple of Doom yet. This night seems to be getting more ridiculous by the minute.

Just as I'm about to start uttering a long list of obscenities which I know would assure me a nice warm seat in hell, I look up to see Alex still standing with the biker. But now he's behind her, his arms wrapped around her.

He's kissing her neck and she's giggling.

My temper rages back up into my chest.

I close my hand in a fist and jerk my arm a few times for what feels like an eternity but is probably only a few minutes. Finally, I manage to violently pull it from the slot, falling backwards as I do. I look at my hand to find I've taken off some skin from the side of my palm. Before I can get up, Jack is standing over me.

"Problems there, buddy?" he asks.

"You could say that."

Jack puts our drinks down on the table and presses the button.

I instantly hear the balls release. I let out a deep sigh and close my eyes.

Lying on the dirty, ash-covered floor, I think back to the week before when Alex and I had gone to a park near my house, just the two of us. We stretched out on the grass together next to the basketball courts, talking for hours about nothing in particular. The sun was warm and bright, and everything was quiet and still.

"What are you going to do? Like, after we've graduated?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said. "Lately I've been thinking about joining the army or something. I mean, at least it'd be a job, and they'd help me pay off my loans and probably even pay for me to go to grad school."

"You can't be serious!"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Anthony, you can't join the army!"

"Why not?"

"Because they'd send you to god-knows where! Somewhere like... Russia or something! I couldn't stand to be apart from you for that long."

"We've been apart for long periods of time before, Alex. I really doubt—"

"It's not the same."

"How?"

"It... it just isn't... Promise me you won't."

"What?"

"Promise me!"

I stayed silent for a moment, debating whether or not I wanted her to know that she still had some sort of influence over my decisions. I'm sure she already knew she did.

"Alright, alright. I promise."

She kissed me, and for a moment it felt like I had a heart again.

It was like we were the only two people on earth. It was one of the few good times the two of us had had together in the past few years. Thinking about it now makes what's left of my heart sink; I'd been giving it to her in pieces over the past 6 years.

"I wouldn't lie on that ground if I were you."

I open my eyes and Alex is standing above me.

"Well you're not me, are you?"

"Suit yourself," she scoffs.

She walks away toward Jack, swaying her hips like before, as I stagger to my feet. I try not to watch this time. Brushing myself off, I go to the table and grab the shots. Jack and Alex are laughing about something. I offer Jack the shot and he takes it, nodding, without a word. I glare at Alex as I clink glasses with Jack and take my shot.

She doesn't look away, doesn't even blink. She knows exactly what I'm thinking.

"So who's your boyfriend over there?" Jack asks. Thank god he did it so I didn't have to. He turns his head so Alex can't see his face and winks at me with a serious expression on his face.

"I don't know," Alex says, "he just started talking to me. He asked me if I wanted to go for a ride on his motorcycle."

"I'm surprised he didn't ask you if you wanted a ride on something else," I say. Alex slaps my arm.

"You could have helped me, you know," she says. Jack purposefully isn't paying attention. "That guy was all over me."

"It didn't really seem like you minded. And what could I possibly do?" I ask. "Say 'Oh, excuse me, Sir, I know you're five times bigger than me and could probably take my head off with one swing of that tree trunk you call an arm, but would you mind giving my quasi on-again off-again girlfriend some breathing room before I'm forced to

scratch your knuckles with my front teeth?' Is THAT what you want me to say?"

"Yes!" she says, not missing a beat. She lets her jaw hang open and I can see a smile forming at the edges of her lips.

I shake my head at her and take a drink of my beer. She stares at me and I can tell she's not that drunk yet. I really don't want to start a fight with her when I won't see her for at least week after tonight, so I bite my bottom lip to keep myself from going on. She can read me too well though and immediately knows I'm holding back on purpose. Her lips turn into a wide smile and she walks away, probably towards the biker.

This time, as she goes, I make sure not to look to see if she's swaying her hips.

"Goddamnit," I mutter.

"Hey, man," Jack says, slapping me on the back. "Can you really say you're surprised at all? I mean what do you really expect from your ex-fiancé?"

"Fair enough," I say.

"I mean, how many times are we gonna go through this? You need to just let it go, for your own sake."

"Yeah... I know."

I finish my beer.

Then another whiskey and coke.

I try not to look at Alex.

Then Alex is taking a slip of paper from the biker and putting it in her bra.

I drink another beer.

Then things start to get really blurry and the next thing I know we're back at Jack's house, sitting on his back porch smoking, laughing, and drinking. I don't remember how we got here, but the alcohol has managed to lull my temper into submission.

I'm lying on the cold, cement porch. There's a broken Christmas-light-reindeer on the ground next to me. I can't stop laughing at it for some reason.

"I can't drive home," Alex says. She walks inside Jack's house.

"Yeah, I gotta go to bed, man," Jack says. "Got work tomorrow." He helps me up and gives me a hug. "You gonna be alright getting home?"

"Yeah, dude. I'm good."

"Well have a good trip," he says. He leans in towards me. "And don't worry about Alex. Nothing's gonna happen tonight."

"Hadn't even crossed my mind."

He closes the door as I stumble down the stairs.

I stagger the two blocks down the street to my house.

Sleep would come easy. Thank god for alcohol.

It's been a week since we were at Schmedley's. I've just spent the past week in a car with my dad, driving across the country to move my sister, Liz, back to Ohio from Washington. All I want right now is to sit on Jack's porch, smoke a cigarette, and drink a beer. I call Jack and he answers almost right away.

"Hey dude, you back?"

"Yeah, Jack. Are you home? Is it cool if I come down?"

"Yeah, sure. Mike and I are just hanging out. Come on over."

I slide my phone shut as I walk out my front door.

When I get to Jack's house, he's sitting on a lawn chair we'd spray painted gold earlier that summer when we were bored and drunk. He tosses me a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon as I walk up the steps. I crack it open and sit down in a chair next to him.

"It's good to be back, man," I say.

"Yeah... yeah... it's good to have you back..." he says.

"So, uh... where's Mike?" I ask.

"Oh, he's inside..." This feels really awkward and I have no idea why.

It's silent for a few minutes, which is out of the ordinary, especially for Jack.

"What's up, man? You alright?" I finally ask.

Jack lets out a deep sigh and stands up. He puts his beer down on his chair.

"Alright, man, there's something I've gotta tell you," he says. He avoids making eye contact with me. "It's been eatin' at me all week, and I didn't want to tell you over the phone while you were gone."

I look at him, completely confused.

"You should know," he says, "you're gonna want to hit me, and you can totally punch me if you want to." I raise an eyebrow at him and sip my beer.

"Also... I'm gonna tell you from over here," he says walking backwards down the stairs to the middle of his backyard.

He stands there looking at me for a few minutes, trying to find the right words. He's already tense, as if he's waiting for me to spring towards him at any moment and give him a right hook. I've never seen him act this way.

"That night before you left...Alex and I slept together."

My mind goes blank and I'm not sure what to think.

I take a drag of my cigarette and keep looking at Jack, whose eyes are shut tight. He peeks an eye open.

"I'm sorry, man," he says. He closes his eyes again. "Just make it quick."

I take a long drag of my cigarette and stand up.

I slowly walk towards Jack, who's still waiting to be hit.

For a second, I can't decide what to do. I'd probably never get another chance to just hit someone in the face like this ever again in my life. But is Alex really still worth all this trouble? Am I really going to allow myself to punch one of my best friends in the face because he slept with my whorish ex who has left me more times than I can count on my fingers? Do I even still have feelings for her, anyways? Well, that's a stupid question—of course I do. But do those feelings really matter?

Does any of this really even matter?

I flick my cigarette into the yard and without a second thought wrap my arms around Jack, giving him a hug. He jumps a little, not expecting it in the least.

"I can tell this was really weighing on you, man," I say, "and I really appreciate your honesty... But fuck it. She's just not worth the trouble anymore."

Jack pats me on the back and returns the hug. I hear my spine crack a little as his arms squeeze tighter and tighter. He's a hell of a lot stronger than I am, and if I would have hit him, chances are I would have hurt myself a lot more than I would have hurt him. I hear the back door open.

"Hey, you fuckers, why don't ya get a room?" Mike bellows. Jack and I turn to face him. Drunk as usual, he's standing on the back porch clad in his Arsenal hoodie, gym shorts, and flip-flops with socks. I start laughing, not at his joke, but because it's funny how some things around here just never seem to change.

"Nice to see you, too, Mike," I say. I chug the rest of my PBR, crush the can, and toss it over my shoulder into the yard. "Why don't you make yourself useful and get me another beer."

