

The Beat of Sorrow

by Brett Garcia Rose

I come home early in the morning smelling like everyone. Lily watches from across the wide, cracked floorboards that separate us, obscured by yellow triangles of sunlight reflecting through our window. The light distorts her somehow, makes her seem larger and vaguely threatening.

I walk towards her slowly, shakily, avoiding the dusty sunlight hanging between us. She watches me as I walk and the watching saddens me, slows me down until I'm barely moving. These eight feet are an ocean to me.

We touch foreheads and kiss lightly and I feel her warmth on my lips. Her eyes are hooded, tired and red, but she smells good and she smiles that sad, tragic smile that derailed me so long ago. She looks into me for a few moments, our eyelashes almost touching, then pulls me down to the futon next to her, hugging me, crying, squeezing so hard I can feel my bones creak. I lay my head on her lap as she talks softly to me, hearing her voice but not her words.

Hours later I wake up and look for a note but there isn't one. This was weeks ago.

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A drummer's job is to count. Every show, every song, every pause; every moment has a number, a value. After a while everything gets counted. An orgasm might be 12 beats, a phone rings for 32. Every breath taken is another 4. You become a master of selection, a chef of time, dicing up your moments into attractive, consumable portions. It is false time, not at all like seconds or minutes or hours, but you get fooled and start to believe that life is counted by your own design, separated and spaced and written for cadence and rhythm and impact, by you, for you, years and years broken and folded into this false time; 8 beats, 16 beats, 40 hotels, 800 women, 1200 seats, deals that never come, people that pretend to like you.

You get to a certain point and start counting backwards.

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I met Lily four years ago in the dark. It was the end of a show, late at night on a Tuesday. She's industry, trolling gigs after hours out of boredom, or nostalgia maybe. The guys are drunk and tired and loud, pretending not to watch as Manny counts out the money with his shaking hands. I'm drinking cold vodka and breaking down my kit while porters wait impatiently on the sides with their dirty water and flat, condescending faces. Lily is there with me, sitting on an amp, seducing me with her sing-song voice.

She stops coming to my shows after we sleep together. She begs me not to be hurt and I am of course; at times severely and childishly so. It creates this space between us that we tentatively accept, each secretly claiming as our own, this big space that we're constantly stepping around and waiting for the other to fall into. Every show I'm slamming my drums and I'm waiting, counting the beats and sweating and hoping not to see her.

It seemed minor until it wasn't. She screams, cries; I throw my gear like a child, breaking important things, cramming all of my fears and flaws and sadness into that little ugly space and making her hold it there for me.

Now I sit on the floor on a last day, my arms wrapped around myself tightly, rocking and shivering like a crazy person, staring at a dirty mirror across the room. I make faces at myself and try to see the difference, the before and the after, but the truth is that I'll always see Lily there, and that other people will see her also, like scars left over from self-surgery, from a psychotic episode where I get drunk and cut into my chest with a dull knife sterilized in tequila, slicing and chopping to remove an imaginary evil or ailment.

I've counted these days truthfully; honestly, I hope. Long, mournful days sinking numbly backwards, surrounded by abandoned boxes of lives we've live; sad, sagging, used boxes, taped and labeled, opened and closed and reopened again and again as we tear each other down.

My time with Lily is false time. Dark nights, separate and distinct, vanish like spaces laid down between tracks. They only count if I decide.

* * *

I spend my days laboring, contracting, sometimes brick or mud or road work. I climb in a pickup truck on some corner and find out what my job for the day is. Early mornings, outside, destroying my hands, counting the cars and people passing me by. A hundred a day if you have papers. Sometimes I come to work directly from a show, drunk, exhausted. I nap standing up. My coworkers think it's cool but they're half my age.

I come home night. I fix my hands or fight with Lily or cry with her or make eggs for her. Then I sleep, or wake up. Maybe I'll make love or pay bills or wash clothes or go to the store. In the daytime world I am small, weak, ordinary. I live on peanut butter and vodka and music and I'm full of holes.

You can't blame Lily, really. You'd never want a drummer who rides a dump truck unless you're still living with your parents. But we've been together for four years, off and on, and even though I remain certain of my theories, and fairly confident that love is a myth taught to children to instill fear of promiscuity and uncertainty and godlessness; even though one glance at her shatters all of my careful logic, still, I do nothing. I'm drunk, honey, I'm tired and confused. Tonight is my big chance, it's all going to be worth it. Give me a little more time, you'll see, you'll understand.

She does see, she understands. She closes her eyes, dips her head and smiles her sad, sad smile.

There's a moment in time, exact to the second, when you find out who you really are.

Our parents tell us we can do anything we put our minds to. We get older and start to wonder why it is that they never put their minds to anything. They'll hint at sacrifices, creating a vague, seeping awareness of impossible parental phenomenon that allowed them to save all of their missed opportunities and passed-by luck, their untaken chances and the mistakes they were too afraid to make and pass them onto us like a trust fund that will never mature.

It festers and frustrates and it is the frustration that allows us to survive, that propels us toward achievement, but it also lessens

our humanity somehow, creates a hunger for the failures of others, a hunger that grows as we grow, diluting us until we're small, hard and needlessly mean, scavenging leftovers from the despair of strangers. We learn to pass it on to others, as if each time we offload a bit of meanness to someone else we become that much kinder.

It is the black market of emotion.

The lies I tell Lily secure my place.

I watch the clock, counting the cold, slow circles of time falling down around me.

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We enter the stage in darkness, people clapping, yelling, climbing. It feels good and despairingly familiar at the same time. People grab at me from the behind ropes, pull my clothes, touch my skin. Their adoration and false friendship feels condescending to me, like people watching gorillas at the zoo and admiring their trapped, wasted strength.

Smoke machines push thick swirls of fog up the walls like escaping ghosts. Floor speakers loop ambient sounds across the room, through your feet, up your bones, circular beats matched to the colored spots roaming the crowds. The guys are nervous, tired; all of us burnt out from fighting.

I count the beats, mark the trail.

We build up slowly; lead first, then bass, keyboards. I'm last, searching and counting, trying to look past you, over your head to the smoky back. You're a stockbroker or a dancer or a bus driver or a teacher and no one really cares, not your mother or lover, not your boss or your caseworker, not even you. Scream, dance, drink, cry.

It only counts if you decide.

A drunk, dancing girl climbs up and falls onto the stage towards my drums; she winks at me and then pukes and I close my eyes and forget for a moment who I wanted to be, who I am. She's laying in her puke with her ear flat on the bass drum, her head thudding against the frame every time I kick.

Two security guys drag her down the stairs by her arms like a sack of sand. You follow, screaming at them, at everyone. This is the

girl you'll take home later, date-rape, marry, divorce, smother to death with a pillow. Blame me, thank me, I don't care.

For 90 minutes we'll look down on each other and let the music bring us together, heal us, deliver us, move us. Follow me, praise me, long for me and my compressed, shiny life. See a girl like Lily sitting offstage in a wooden chair in a fourth-rate club somewhere, crying, holding on so hard to so little, and as it breaks your heart to watch; forgive me. Understand me. You can't rescue us.

We all deserve more.

In my solo now; the guys already backstage, the muscles in my forearms burning, screaming, my head throbbing, my eyes closed, stinging with sweat. You fall silent in the onslaught, caught up in the speed.

When I open my eyes at the end, Lily is there. The stage lights go out and I play on, jumping the beats, stumbling. She stands up from a table on the balcony wearing an emerald green dress, her hair up in chopsticks. My agent is next to her, passing out folders, whispering in her ear, giving me thumbs, fives.

I play faster, harder, gunning the dark.

She walks a few steps, passing through a spotlight, then turns towards me and raises her head slowly. She watches me with mascara trails sliding down her face, smiling softly, mouthing words I can't understand and moving backwards, away from the lights. I stare at her lips as they move, crashing down on my cymbals like rain, making a beat of our sorrows and begging her to slow down.

She walks away carefully, deliberately, gaining speed and force. I play my beats to her steps, moving as she moves, killing my drums, willing them to shatter with my arms and my mind and my heart, pounding with everything I have left.

In the darkness, past the end, I play on.

She's at the stairs now, running hard towards a far door, her hair falling down and chasing behind her in long silk rivers. I cry on my snare and it changes the sound, makes it deeper, better somehow, softer and more soulful. The music binds us completely

until the door closes and she's gone. I sit in the dark waiting, my eyes closed tightly as the applause dies down, staying through the sad, thick silence that follows. I sit there forever, staring at my hands in adrenaline depression; seeing, feeling, hoping.

It is false time.

