

Click, Then Silence

by Dallas Woodburn

"I miss you," I say. I don't mean to; the words just tumble off my tongue, like pearls slipping off a broken necklace then spilling across the floor, a few caroming underneath the furniture. You can try to collect them all and string them back together, but you'll inevitably be missing one or two.

The good thing about the phone is he can't see me, can't see the way I'm nervously twisting a strand of hair around my index finger, around and around and around, as if by doing so I can turn back time and take back those three little words I so carelessly threw at him.

My best friend Susanne says guys don't like to have things thrown at them, even unexpected compliments; they like to work for it, or at least feel like they are working. I haven't asked Keith if this is true, of course, but if I did I bet he would snicker, "Why do you always listen to Susanne?" I don't think he likes my friends much, Susanne least of all.

I hear him breathing on the other end of the phone. Just soft breathing. The silence lingers, stretches, two breaths, three, five, and then he exhales an awkward little laugh and says, "I'll talk to you later."

"Okay, bye." I wait a few more breaths — mine, one, two, four — until I hear the tiny click of him breaking away from me, and then I, too, hang up.

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I wasn't lying. I do miss Keith. It's been three weeks since school got out for the summer and I already miss him more than I like to

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admit — not to him, of course; not even to myself. We met the week before finals, walking around the track to raise money for diabetes research. I was walking backwards, talking to Susanne, and I bumped into Keith. Susanne's a good friend, but she never warns you when you're about to run into something. Her walking shift ended soon after, so then it was just Keith and me. Walking and talking. Before I knew it, two hours had passed and my calves felt wobbly as uncooked spaghetti. That's the thing about Keith: not only does he make my legs go wobbly, he's also an easy person to talk to. The next week, between studying for exams and writing term papers, we found time to see a movie and go to dinner. He met my roommates; I met his best friend. The night before I left, he helped me pack up my room. Then he kissed me goodbye for the summer. "I'll call," he said.

So. I take his word for it. I only phone him once the whole summer long. The rest of the time, I wait for him to call me. He's got a nine-to-five job. I don't want to bother him. Above all, I don't want to be one of "Those Girls," as Susanne calls them, the ones who can't go for a single day without talking to their boyfriends. I detest "Those Girls."

Not that Keith is my boyfriend, exactly — we haven't discussed it. Exactly. But he's calling me three times a week, sometimes four times, once five. When he calls he says he's bored, but I know it's really because he misses me. Guys just don't like to say those things. It's part of their "code" or something. I think it's stupid. Susanne thinks Keith's stupid, too, but I disagree. He's just a guy.

The one day I call him is May 18, his birthday. Twenty-one years old. He doesn't pick up, so I leave a message. I don't sing. I have a terrible voice. My dad will sometimes describe a person as having "a face for radio" — well, I have a singing voice for writing. My nineteenth birthday is a week after Keith's, and he calls and sings me "Happy Birthday." Turns out he has a voice for writing, too, but I

don't care.

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He calls me from the airport, waiting in a long security line to board his plane from Houston to LAX. I'm already back in L.A., in my new apartment four blocks from campus and one block from his frat house. It's my first apartment, with a chipped kitchen sink and peeling paint and a constellation of tiny holes in the bedroom walls, ghosts of thumb-tacked posters from former lives lived here. The bedroom window faces a fenced-in parking lot and another apartment building that looks like it used to be a cheap motel. But it's one of the most beautiful views I've ever seen, because — for this year, at least — it will be my view, and my bedroom, all to myself, and the kitchen will be my kitchen and the bathroom will be my bathroom. Keith will come over all the time, so often that he'll know where I keep the Band-Aids and the baking soda, the Tide for laundry and the Tupperware for leftovers. He'll know to put a new roll of toilet paper on so it spools out from the top rather than the bottom. He'll take care of me when I'm sick, bring me ice cubes and chicken noodle soup. And if I feel like cooking an omelette at 4 a.m., or sleeping outside on the balcony, or doing my homework in only my bra and panties, I can, because this year I have an apartment, my own apartment, and I can do whatever I want with it. I can paint the walls lime green if I want, as long as I re-paint them white before my lease is up and I leave the apartment to be lived in by some other life.

When Keith asks how my new place is, though, I don't go into all of that. I just say, "It's okay." He wouldn't understand the appeal of lime-green walls.

"I'll be there in a few hours," he says. "I'll call you when I get in."

"Can't wait!" I reply, giddy, unthinking. "I miss you!"

I think he hears me, but maybe not, because there's just the tiny familiar click on the other end, then silence.

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Keith must have missed me, because the first three weeks back at school he comes over nearly every night. We eat dinner sprawled across the couch with our bare feet on the coffee table because we're living on our own and we don't have to sit at the dinner table or keep our feet off the furniture. We eat off chintzy plastic plates with mismatched silverware and drink cheap wine out of Pirates of the Carribean water glasses from Carl's Jr. and let the dishes pile up in the sink because my tiny kitchen doesn't have a dishwasher and neither of us wants to wash dishes, just dry them. One night I fall asleep on the couch, and when I wake up it's past midnight and I can hear water running. I stumble into the kitchen and there he is, hands submerged in the half-filled sink, scrubbing three-day-old pasta residue off Target clearance dishware. *True love*, I think, and I wrap my arms around his waist and he turns and gently lifts my chin with soapy fingers and no more dishes get washed or dried that night.

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A Tuesday evening one week later, Keith calls and I don't recognize his voice.

"This is hard for me to say," he begins, and I feel like I am choking on my own heartbeat. "But I don't think we should see each other anymore."

Apparently there's an ex-girlfriend, and he and she are getting back together. Or already did. I didn't even know he had an ex-girlfriend. A recent one, I mean. Keith and I haven't had that

conversation yet. The past relationships conversation. That usually comes around week five. We're at four weeks, two days. Almost there, but not quite. Not ever, now.

"I'm sorry, Stace," he says. I don't know if I believe him. I don't know what to say. It's just our breathing. One breath, three, four. Click, then silence. Silence, except for the rapid pounding of my protesting heart, and the steady bass beat thumping Ja Rule at a party at the former cheap motel outside my window.

* * *

I miss him. A lot at first, then a little less, then a little more, then a lot less. I'm over him, I tell myself. It's two weeks after the break-up, and I meet Susanne for lunch. "I'm soooo over him," I tell her.

The next night, I almost call him, because the apartment feels particularly empty and I feel particularly alone. Like a fragile, cracked eggshell peeled away from a hardboiled egg and thrown into the trash. I almost call him, but the speed dial number my finger pushes belongs to Susanne.

She's out, but comes over the next day. We stand in the middle of the living room, surveying the peeling white paint on the walls, and consider what life would be like if they were lime green instead.

"It'd be . . . a lot of green," Susanne murmurs.

"Maybe too much green," I say.

* * *

Three days later, he calls. I hold the ringing phone in my hand and read his name on the caller ID. Against my better judgment, I answer.

"I made a huge mistake," he says.

"Please, Keith . . ." I say. "Just . . . don't."

"Stace, I'm trying to tell you that I'm sorry."

I look out the window, at the spindly leaves of the chestnut trees silhouetted orange from the glow of the streetlight, a whisper of autumn against the blue evening sky. In a few weeks, the now-green leaves will turn orange in the daylight as well, then shrivel brown and fall from the trees to join the cigarette butts and condom wrappers and smashed beer cans already littering the dirty pavement.

I sigh. "Goodbye, Keith."

"Wait! Hold on."

"What?"

"I miss you," he says. "I miss you so much."

It's the perfect thing to say, what I've been waiting to hear, what I hoped he would say all summer long. I finally got what I wanted.

Only now, it feels cheap and too small. Like outgrown sneakers with frayed shoelaces.

"I'm sorry, Keith," I say. "But I don't miss you."

You can't string the pearls back onto a broken necklace and refasten the clasp and make it good as new. So I don't wait for his familiar tiny click. I'm the one who hangs up first.

