

Is This Something?

by Dallas Woodburn

My cell phone rings. It is 12:36 a.m. on a Friday night and I am at a party hosted by the College Democrats. HOUSE OF DEMOCRACY reads a banner stretched across the front porch, but to me it looks just like every other frat house on campus.

“Hey!” you say, too loudly. You are drunk.

“Hi,” I exhale, ducking into a musty cave of a bedroom. A pirate flag hangs on the wall above the desk. I'm not even a little tipsy, so I don't have an excuse for this kind of behavior. A fly buzzes in the back left corner of my brain, warning me, *Maybe this is not a good idea*, and yet. Yet. Yet, I saw your name on the caller ID and I answered the phone and began talking to you anyway. And here I am, in the pirate bedroom, tracing circles on the sullied carpet floor with the pointy toe of my shoe. Talking.

* * *

Four years older. You are in grad school in Florida. I am a college sophomore in California. Love for you filled all of my teenage years. Still five months till I turn twenty.

* * *

Every high school dance, I wanted to take you as my date. But I knew that would have been silly. Back in high school a wide chasm yawned between us.

As we've grown older, the chasm has gradually shrank and shrank. Until I returned home for winter break and found it was

merely a thin trace of a crack that I stepped across, unblinking.

* * *

The phone connection crackles. "What?" I ask you.

"I'm drunk!"

I laugh. "I know."

"Really? You can tell?"

"Yes."

"Stace!" you say. "Listen! I want to tell you something."

My heartbeat revs up like a car merging onto the freeway.

"Tell me," I say.

* * *

The night before I headed back to school we sat in your Jeep Grand Cherokee, littered with crushed Coke Zero cans and yellow Starburst wrappers, parked in front of my house. The air conditioner whooshed quietly in the background. You are the type of person who wears shirtsleeves in the middle of winter and is still always too hot. I am the type of person who wears a sweater at the beach. Goosepimples sprung up on my arms and I rubbed them quietly as we avoided each other's eyes and avoided saying Goodbye.

When two people say Goodbye in a parked Jeep Grand Cherokee on a star-freckled January night, and the air-conditioned air is thick with kisses unknissed, and his index finger gently strokes her goosepimpled knee and he turns off the air conditioner without a

word, goodbye suddenly becomes Goodbye-with-a-capital-G, and to say it means they will miss each other.

* * *

Jacksonville, Florida is as far away from Los Angeles as physically possible while still remaining in the United States.

Well, okay, I guess you could be in Maine. Maine would be farther. I'll give you that.

* * *

You didn't say you would miss me. You didn't kiss me, either. I kicked a couple Coke cans out of the way, opened the Jeep door, and stepped down onto the pavement. I smiled a tiny restrained smile as I shut the Jeep door. Your goodbye was of the small-g variety, made by holding up your left hand as you turned around in my cul-de-sac. I waved back. Watched you become nothing more than a glowing pair of tail-lights swallowed up by the darkness.

* * *

"Stace!" you say, too loudly. You are so drunk. Pathetically drunk. I should think you're pathetic. But I don't. I think you're cute.

"What?" I ask.

"I miss you."

"You miss me?"

"I miss you." You sound on the verge of tears.

* * *

You wouldn't be cute to an ordinary person. Your ears stick out and your eyes are too close together. Your forehead is immense. You have a paunch.

But I am in love with you. You're cute to me.

* * *

"Why didn't you kiss me?" I ask.

"Because," you say.

"Why didn't you?"

"It would have ruined everything," you say.

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know."

"What do we even have to ruin?"

"This," you say, insistent. "This."

"What is this?"

"This is something," you say. "Isn't it?" So drunk you slur your words together.

* * *

It is 4:36 a.m. in Jacksonville, Florida. Here I am, and there you are, and we are together in this same moment in time. Yet your clock

is marking this moment with different numbers than my own.

* * *

A tall boy barges into the pirate bedroom. I look up guiltily from the bed.

"Campus police are here," the boy says. "The party's breaking up."

I grab my coat and follow the stream of co-eds stumbling outside. The HOUSE OF DEMOCRACY banner hangs crookedly, deflated.

"I have to go," I tell you.

"You do?"

"I do. I'm sorry. I'll talk to you later, k?"

"Okay. Bye, Stacey."

A small-g goodbye or a big-G Goodbye? Impossible to tell. It's just like you to leave out the "good" altogether.

