

Late Night Phone Call

by J.L. Gaynor

When the phone rings that late at night, it's not good.

When I first hear it, pulling myself from the dregs of sleep, I hesitate to answer it. My hand hovers over the cordless for what feels like an eternity. Finally, I answer it and I'm greeted by your roommate's voice. It doesn't sound like her, her voice high and tight with fear.

"There's been an accident," she says. "They don't expect her to live through the night. I-I need you to drive. I can't do this alone."

In the next moment, the light goes on. I pull on a baggy sweatshirt, thrusting my feet into sneakers. I pull my messy hair back with a rubber band as I race down the stairs, my mind reeling. She is waiting for me outside, similarly clad in pajama pants and a sweatshirt. Her face is pale, her eyes red and raw.

"What happened?"

As we walk to the car, I could only make out the words "drunk driver" and "head-on collision". We drive in silence, the dashboard lights casting our faces into odd shadows. I drive on autopilot, my mind conjuring up an image of you as the words, "she won't make it through the night" echo through my head.

We met two years ago in a mythology class. I was a transfer from New York and you were a second-year student. I had shown up late the first day, stepping over book bags to squeeze into an empty corner in the packed lecture hall. You came in after me, announcing your presence by slamming the door behind you. The professor glared at you, but you ignored him, walking to my corner to take the only empty seat beside me.

You slumped down in the chair, yawning as you rummaged through your bag for a pen and a notebook. I stared at you, mesmerized by the ease with which you moved, the careless way you began to take notes before looking me over. You gave me a sleepy smile.

"And you are?"

"A transfer," I blurted.

You laughed, attracting a few dirty looks that you kindly returned. "And I'm exhausted. Pleased to meet you."

I sped through the rain soaked streets, staring straight ahead. I wanted to be at the hospital for you, *had* to be at the hospital for you.

We began talking after that first class together, learning that we only lived a few doors down from each other in the residence hall. We were both English majors, aspiring one day to be famous writers. We shared common tastes in music and books, our differences complimenting each other and bringing us closer together.

As we became more familiar with each other, we began to hold late night conversations in our hallway. We shared truths about ourselves, things not many people knew. I trusted you immediately, finding you to be a perfect match for me. I learned your mannerisms, facial expressions and body language, reading all three like a book.

We could make each other laugh with just a slight gesture. We could share the same thought without a word passing between us. We soothed the rawness of broken hearts for each other and dispensed advice at any hour. We drank, smoked and got high together.

I walk into the empty waiting room at the hospital, looking around for anyone familiar. I see your brother in a corner, his head down as he studies the floor. He shows no emotion when he sees us. Instead, he stands and hugs each of us in turn. Your parents are in with you and a doctor. We can't see you unless we're family.

I ask your brother how you are and if he has seen you. He only shakes his head, his face drawn and pale. He said he didn't want to see because he didn't want his memory tainted.

I'm not sure what drew me to you. In truth, our personalities probably should have never meshed, but they did. I questioned why a few times. You're always levelheaded and down to earth. I'm too

serious and you showed me life in a different light, from a different point of view. You saw it slightly cynical, aged by some of the shit you've seen while growing up. We were both survivors, but you taught me how to live a life you didn't need to survive.

I pace the waiting room, feeling numb. Your roommate sits in a corner, her hands wrapped around a cold cup of stale coffee as she stares out the window. Your brother sits in another corner, still staring at the floor. With a jolt, I realize just how much you and your brother look alike. Another image of you crosses my mind.

You're walking across campus, clad in old jeans, a ratty sweatshirt and sneakers. Your long hair is pulled back at your neck, your thumbs hooked under the shoulder straps of your book bag. Your eyebrows are furrowed slightly in thought, your eyes hidden behind the dark lenses of your sunglasses.

I look up to see a stone-faced doctor walking our way. Behind him, I can see your parents. Your father is also stone-faced, but his red eyes and damp cheeks betray him. He has his arm around your mother's shoulders and she has her hand to her face, hiding her tears.

I decide then that I don't want to see what's left of you, unless I know that you can be okay. But my hope that you will be okay is fading fast as I watch the doctor and your parents walk toward us. I begin to steel myself to face them.

I learned love and life with you.

I will have to learn loss and death without you.

