

Throwing Pencils

by Lauren Napier

"Hey there, mister." After a few drinks at a bar on Hollywood Blvd, texting those you've almost kissed seems like a good idea. Especially when they're geographically miles away and the emotional stimulus is of the safe variety. I take my vodka and tonic out onto the smoking patio. Eavesdropping on slurred conversations and pick-up lines. Watching the tourists stumble and stare at my hometown streets. My phone vibrates and I trade my cigarette for my phone in my right hand.

"You in L.A.?" it reads.

"I am..." I respond, wondering where else I would be. I have been off tour and catching up on real life for a couple of weeks now.

"Come to my hotel."

Hold up. It's one a.m. This seems like a cheap thrill request: a stab at getting laid while he's in town. Did he have to be in town? My text was initially sent with the thought that he was off the road and resting in his East Coast abode. But on the other hand...why not have an adventure? My friends won't be upset if I ditch them for the last few hours of Sunday or the first few of Monday — however you wish to see it.

"Where is it?" I respond.

"Hollywood and Highland."

Not far at all. A ten minute walk will do my head some good anyway: The cold air. The quiet streets that will only be interrupted by a stumbling drunk or a couple sloppily making out. I remember being in this same hotel on pit stops on tour before I lived in Los Angeles. The cigarette butts would pile up outside the door. The trash can would overflow with empty bottles. Music would be written intermittently. Those stereotypical times when the lifestyle becomes more important than the music. But this time is different: this is not my space and this is not on my terms. I knock on the door. There's no answer. My phone rings and his name is on the

caller ID. For a moment, I ponder turning around and leaving but my feet stay planted and I answer the frantically ringing phone.

"Hello?"

"You there? I'm not."

"I picked up on that. I knocked."

"I'm pulling up now. The guys are going to drop me off."

"Okay. Do you want me to meet you at the front or just..."

"Stay put. I'll see you shortly."

There's a few awkward moments of me compulsively checking my phone for a distraction. A nervous tick I have picked up when alone. Look out over the railing. Look at my phone screen. It didn't vibrate. It didn't make any sound. And yet I look at it. Look out. Look at my phone screen.

"Hey you."

I turn around to his smiling face and his open arms. We hug. And I realize that I do not know this man aside from dancing at after parties and him carrying fruit around in his pockets. A kiwi? A lime? A conversation starter. We walk into the hotel room and I sit on the bed: a queen size with a squeaky polyester comforter. The kind that makes you wonder how many times it has (or hasn't) been washed and how many times it's been sat upon by two strangers. He quickly ventures into the bathroom to brush his teeth and wash his face.

We engage in some light conversation. I can never tell if he's drunk or using some sort of substance or if perhaps his brain just doesn't fire at the pace that we have come to accept as normal. Eventually he walks closer to me and sits next to me. Our thighs side by side, almost touching, almost making that physical connection, but not quite. This night isn't what I expected. And that's a good thing for I don't really have the emotional capacity for a one-night stand with an acquaintance. It's never really been a part of my make-up to take part in the shallow and anonymous. I prefer to overthink the details for days after, picture the ending before it's even close to happening, and second-guess every interaction in the days that follow.

He wants to quit his band. Even though they are the headliners of a major US festival tour. Even though they are selling large numbers of their album. Even though they have a dedicated and large fan base. It's not what makes him happy and he says that he's never even liked the band. But it is what is familiar now. Familiar and expected. Letting down one person is easy. How would it feel to let down thousands? He shows me baby pictures and tells me about the last time he remembers being happy. At this point our conversation has gotten more personal and our bodies are leaning in towards each other. This is when I start to shake. The adrenaline from being so close to another person becomes overwhelming and my body can't control it. So I shiver. As most do, he assumes I am cold. We move from on top to under the comforter. I still shiver.

"I'm not cold. I'm actually sweating a little bit."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Whenever I'm close to another person. A guy. I shake. It's nerves and adrenaline."

"What helps it?"

"I suppose eventually it stops."

"I'll hold you 'til you are comfortable enough to stop shaking."

We nestle further into the covers and his scrawny but comforting arm is around my side. I feel him reach over to the bedside table, but am too content to look up and see what he is trying to grab. He shows it to me. A pencil. The one that was in the drawer by the prerequisite Bible. He throws the pencil across the room.

"There!"

"What?"

"Wherever that pencil landed is the happy medium."

"The happy medium of what?"

"I love too many people and you love too few. Wherever that pencil landed is the happy medium. But we will never know where it landed. Still lost."

With that I smile and drift off to sleep quietly and motionless. The shivering has stopped. And I am comfortable. Not in love. But in a state of caring and of being cared for. It's four a.m. and my phone is

dead. I'm not worried about getting home. I'm not worried about any of it. I am simply content with his grasp, with the hotel room, with the vulnerability of the night.

The digital numbers flash six a.m. I sneak out from under his arm. Thinking I have successfully left without waking him. He stirs. And gets up to open the door for me and say goodbye.

"It's nice to meet you, Lauren," he says as he hugs me goodbye.

Six am and the city is asleep. The only people present on the boulevard are those cleaning the marbled stars. The city is mine. And I belong to the city. And, for once, I feel a bit of accountability to another person without the sense of weight that usually accompanies it.

Another text message a couple weeks later. This time he initiates. "In my dream last night I was you and there was a mirror I was looking into that made everything black and white and pretty."

Since that night, I have tried to stray from my normal path and boundaries: to let people in and learn to trust them. I have learned to be open to adventures and to people. But I have also learned that living in the city, it is much safer to keep people at arm's length in order to protect yourself and not be broken. It's not easy and it's usually the lonelier path. But one has to do what one has to do to survive in a city of strangers.

