

The Uprising

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My first kiss happened in the final days of summer as I began my sophomore year of college. We were hidden beneath the electric September sky, clinging to a forgotten square of grass that was patchworked to the side of an entirely forgettable hill. The hill crouched at the shadowy edge of Boulder's neon night-glow. The thrum of crickets fell and rose above the steady buzz of streetlamps, whose tired orange orbs spread out in a network from the tips of our intertwined toes, like the grid of our destinies cast down from the stars for all to read. Every so often a pair of headlights would hurry past like Hermes delivering a hasty revision to our fate. The heady adrenaline sharpened my senses unnaturally so that trails of intense color and scent seemed to rise up like enchanted vespers from the cool earth. A glow hovered just inches above the grass, bobbing between the moist green fingertips which were pulsating in time. Each heartbeat was terrifying. My limbs tingled with a foreign energy, and every breath was heavy and deliberate as if urging me on. Closer. Just a little closer.

Strictly chronologically speaking, I suppose you could argue it wasn't *really* my first kiss. But it was the first kiss worth remembering anyway. What I mean to say is that it was the first time I kissed someone and felt the earth move.

I spent the summer preparing for that night. It was the same summer during which torrential rains besieged the city and engorged the creek to the point where parts of the path had to be closed off due to flooding. I wouldn't have told you at the time that I was preparing. I

couldn't have truthfully. But at some point during that summer Better Judgment's iron grip on me loosened just a little while I wasn't watching, and the first mutinous stirrings slipped up to the surface.

As April barreled into May and finals drove us out of the flirtatious sunlight and into mind-numbing academic regimen, I realized with a start one day that I would be going home. There was nothing keeping me in Boulder for the summer. My gut lurched at the thought of returning to familiarity. Like many small towns, the community of Pine, Colorado is built upon a strict hierarchy. It is a necessary structure. Without it the neighbors, teachers, Safeway clerks, and random acquaintances wouldn't know how to act around each other. But I knew that if stuffed back into this mold, the unique individual who had just begun to shyly gaze out from behind my ribcage would suffocate.

So I negotiated with my parents to borrow the family truck for the first week of summer and while everyone else was meeting their parents at the airport and shipping things home I transferred all my belongings from my cramped dorm room into the back of the truck. It is strange to see the accumulations of one's life compressed into three even rows of plain brown boxes, locked up, and parked on an unfamiliar street. In the absence of space and ritual to define them, belongings begin to take on a heavy insignificance. Every time I was forced to dig something else out of the most inaccessible box, shifting the other boxes around became more and more of a task. It was as if they were reminding me that things can only remain in suspension for so long before gravity demands a resting place.

Every morning for a week I rose early from various friends' couches, swapped out a fresh pair of underwear from a suitcase on the truck's back seat, and combed my hair in the

driver's side mirror. I ironed my shirt with a wet washcloth, carefully touched up a borrowed pair of my friend's meticulously black army shoes, and then spent my mornings shaking hands, flashing smiles, and trading false promises with every manager between Arapahoe Avenue and Spruce Street. In the afternoons I sat in the shade swatting flies and anxieties. The two hovered around my head with equal insistence.

Two days after I had promised my parents to have the truck home I was rescued by two job offers. I chose to work as a waiter at The Mediterranean restaurant on the west end of Walnut. The tips were rumored to be some of the best in Boulder and as an added benefit, the managers believed wholeheartedly in educating all their employees in wine pairing – even those of us who were underage. The managers passed out spit buckets during wine class but they always remained conspicuously dry. That summer was likely the first and last time I will ever taste a \$300 bottle of imported Italian Barolo.

Secure in the promise of a consistent paycheck, I confirmed a sublet I had arranged with a friend, set the boxes to rest in my new room, and returned the truck home. In the early days of June the summer seemed to roll on past the edge of my sight endlessly so I embraced people and experiences with a confidence in their permanence. Eric was the only other roommate staying in the apartment for the summer. Most people are overwhelmed by Eric's overflowing loquaciousness when they first meet him, but for me it was reassuring. He was quite happy to take the wheel of any conversation so I never felt any pressure to be funny or insightful like I do around others sometimes. The outlet for Eric's hyperactivity was soccer. He was always inviting me to go with him to the turf field across the freeway from the apartment. The once or twice I went I was forced to surrender to the shade long before his bottomless energy finally sputtered

and drove him out of the sun. It was easy to envision floppy canine ears and a blissful pink tongue lolling out of the corner of Eric's permanently upturned mouth as the blue adidas ball lured him in a zigzag pattern across the open turf.

Eric always returned from work before me. Seinfeld or Community would inevitably be blaring on the television when I walked in the door. I would change, hand him a beer, and we'd settle in for an hour or two of aimless camaraderie. We worked hard that summer. Both of us are the kind of men who relish exhaustion. A mutual respect grew between us because of it. We would just sit in the living room – me in the recliner and Eric on the couch – and sink deep into that delicious bone-ache that builds up after hard work becomes routine. It's a source of pride really, knowing that you've earned the soreness.

In the afternoons when the restaurant was slow, I was occasionally granted two precious hours. I would escape through the ally door, follow the creek path down to Boulder Public Library, and take refuge deep in the mercifully air-conditioned stacks. Before I left the restaurant I was careful to hang up my Better Judgment on a peg next to my apron for fear she might follow. I knew she wouldn't approve of the books that fell into my unfettered hands.

I always went to the same section. It was never intentional, but I always found myself standing in front of the same shelf with the same titles whispering down to me dangerously. No one else ever ventured that far back in the library. After standing there nervously for a few minutes I would eventually collect a stack on the floor, flop down next to it, and lose myself in the stories of men and women who had joined the rebellion. The stories were familiar but I pretended not to recognize them. I sat and read and feigned disinterest – like you do when you want to hear a stranger's conversation but you try and make yourself look like you're deaf or

something. I never took the books out of the library. Deep in the stacks I was safe from Better Judgment's accusing stare, but I knew that taking any one of the books beyond the powerful glass walls of the library would be the ultimate act of treason.

The books were not my only treachery.

The club is situated at the northernmost corner of Five Points. It was the only one of its kind in Denver that I had heard of. The neighborhood is gritty; penned in by half-abandoned rail yards to the northwest, skyscrapers to the south, and contempt to the east. I didn't know it at the time, but during the first half of the 20th century these streets were the fabled Harlem of the West, and one of Kerouac's favorite haunts, which probably explains the area's persistent surliness.

It was twenty blocks from the bus station to the club. I passed a knife fight the first time I went. Hell knows why I decided to walk. I didn't once stop, for fear the dream might break at any unannounced instance and flooded by a reawakened sensibility I would never reach my destination. I knew it was stupid even as I walked. The wind ruthlessly tore at my thin jacket in blatant violation of July. My stomach churned the entire route. I had argued with Better Judgment viciously until she had given in and agreed to wait at the bus station. Even so I could hear her screams of fury echoing behind me the entire way. But it didn't matter. I was dragged on by a force I feared too much to name. I had to see for myself. I had to know.

In the clarity of hindsight I am amazed I was not robbed or beaten or worse those nights. Eyes darting back and forth like a cornered wildcat, I was the picture of naivety. The first time I was turned away at the doorstep. 21 and up. So stupid. An Ethiopian taxi driver took me back to the bus station. He was Catholic like me. I told him we were brothers. He said he knew.

The second time the unnamable force lured me to the club it was 18 and up night, but I would have found a way in even if it wasn't. Eyes cut through the fog and churning torsos as I stepped gingerly around the scant patches of purple light. They recognized me instantly. I took my place with the others along the back wall. We turned our gazes determinedly to the floor and risked furtive glances only when we sensed another brush our bodies. A younger boy pulled me softly into the sea of twisting bodies and tried to rip open my button-down shirt. I silently begged him to both disappear and stay pressed against my pounding chest for the rest of eternity. It was exhilaration, but I knew it was not freedom. I left shortly after. Too ashamed to keep her out any longer I submitted to Better Judgment's cruel taunting the long way back to the apartment, until defeated by the sweet exodus of sleep.

I remember returning home from work one evening as the first drops of a colossal thunderstorm descended like paratroopers on the morning of V-day. The static in the air foretold that the final assault was at our doorstep. When I entered the apartment a nervous wind hurtled through the yawning balcony door where Eric stood. He was staring out at the black clouds amassing at the feet of the mountain's trembling battlements.

"Let's watch," I whispered, sensing the monumentality.

"Yeah OK."

We dragged two plastic chairs up to the railing and shuddered with every strike that split open the atmosphere as the sky unleashed her wrath upon the earth. We were changed that afternoon, as most men are by war.

The next day the creek was bloated and gluttonous, having devoured the land right up to the ankles of the cottonwoods. The surface barely moved. It crept along with a drunken lethargy, like a greedy python that swallowed some unfortunate victim too large to digest. Eric and I invited friends over for a barbecue at the apartment that evening. My friend Abby was among them. She had loved me in the spring, but eventually she had grown frustrated and moved on. Now she and Eric laughed and flirted and traded back massages late into the evening. I have been told on good authority that Eric gives excellent back massages. I lounged comfortably in the lap of the pleasant fuzzy feeling which flowed forth from my beer-stretched stomach and crept across the surface of my half-closed eyeballs. Wrapped in the easy banter of my friends and dozing easily, I was yanked back to sobriety when I heard Eric's voice turn serious. Abby had asked Eric about his artist brother who was now teaching English in South Korea. I hastily glanced in the direction of Better Judgment but she had succumbed to the beer and the night and was snoring on the floor next to my shoes. So I allowed myself to listen. Eric was telling how his family had come to celebrate his brother, and I could tell by the earnest tone in his voice that he knew about the revolution and had declared his support for the rebels. Questions leapt in my throat then fizzled out and burned my esophagus as I choked them back. I wanted so badly to find out what Eric knew. I had always sensed I was safe around him. Now this was proof. But I was keenly aware of Better Judgment snoozing at my feet, and I crushed my questions for fear she would wake with a start and overhear the act of betrayal.

I needed her you see. Loved her even. I knew my dependence on her was poison but I also knew that there existed a powerful link between us, like an umbilical cord that inextricably and vitally binds a mother to the child inside her womb and the child to its mother. I had

carefully reinforced this link for as long as I can remember. Ever since Better Judgment had discovered me at age twelve hiding under the family dining table with furtively stolen articles on Matthew Shepard and columns written by Dan Savage. Scared and embarrassed I had banished the questions and turned to her, swearing loyalty. After the club I had begged her forgiveness and she had pulled me close again. I buried my head deeper and deeper in her bosom as questions amassed in the darkness just beyond the edges of my consciousness, like armies of bandits waiting for the right moment to wrench me from her protective embrace. I knew that if the link between us was suddenly severed, one of would die. And I wasn't sure that it wouldn't be me.

I kept visiting the library though. And one day, somewhere among the final ruddy weeks of summer, I took one of the books home. It was the memoirs of a man named Andrew Tobias which he had entitled The Best Little Boy in the World Grows Up. Apparently he is a prominent insurance columnist and he originally published the book under the pen name John Reid. I smuggled it back to the apartment between two volumes of Langston Hughes poetry, and at first I only took it out after everyone had gone in bed. But after a while I stopped hiding it under my mattress in the morning. Better Judgment glared at the cover disapprovingly, but she never mentioned it out loud. I grew to like seeing it lying on the floor next to my bed and I developed the habit of glancing expectantly in its direction every time I walked into my room.

The first time I said it out loud the words were lent to me. Abby and I were wedged together in the belly of a pathetically sagging hammock. Both of us were a little drunk and inhaling deeply the last sultry breaths of August. The alcohol invited a reckless honesty. We

laughed and flirted and huddled together against the first wisps of fall. She had cornered me earlier during the party and dragged me out there. Still irritated by my total oblivion to her affections the previous spring, she wanted answers from me.

“You’re not gay are you?” she ribbed with a snort.

I have suspected that I am a coward but I didn’t know it for certain until that moment. She rescued me with those words. It was divine intervention. The night tensed in anticipation and yet I remained calm. I knew what I would say even before the words tumbled over my lips. Even so I stalled. I glanced back once more into the pleading eyes of Better Judgment. I hadn’t noticed how wretched she had grown. “Be wise,” she begged. But the door stood open and on the other side I could taste the new morning air.

“Actually I think I am.”

Abby almost flipped us both out of the hammock.

Suddenly the night breeze turned frigid and pummeled my lungs in merciless waves. Birth isn’t meant to be a pleasant experience. Abby’s delighted laughter shattered against the edge of my awareness and fell tinkling into the grass around us but I barely noticed. I was in mid free-fall. It’s a strange feeling before you hit the ground. You realize that everything is lost. It’s all been obliterated in a wave of tremendous dizziness. And yet an acute perception of my own creative power cut through the heart of it. Only in that moment when everything has been demolished can you begin to conceive of infinite possibilities. I could build *anything* I realized. The vertigo made me sick.

Eventually I landed. I met Ian, but that's the start of a different story. What you need to know is that he was the one who helped me discover what it means to be whole. Eventually I learned to say the declaration of my wholeness of my own accord. Mirrors – that's the trick. You practice in front of the mirror. Ian showed me that too. It all seems a little trivial now, funny even. The fear and the vertigo softened with time, but the memory of that summer – especially the night in the hammock with Abby – that remains. I think it always will. It's important I think. It's the same reason we all have belly buttons – to remind us that someone had to cut us free too.

Eventually, too, I learned to listen to a kinder, wiser judgment. I first felt it that night with Ian, on the patch of grass on the hill. It was nothing more than a gentle pressure on the back of my skull. Just a subtle gesture of approval. But it gave me that last crucial jolt of courage. Or maybe it was madness. The two feel almost the same when your faces are that close.

Closer. Just a little closer.

The best part was the scratchiness. Our cheeks brushed past each other with a lively scraping sound, like the feeling of rubbing two pieces of sandpaper together. It was rugged and earthy and so wonderfully different from what I had imagined. I could almost smell the sawdust. And he – he was beautiful.