

Someone's Story

By B.A. Bellec

Determination: Dig Deep

The weather is frightfully cold. A man with an eighty-eight on his chest is sitting on a rock. He looks exhausted. His balaclava has been heaved onto the ground next to him. Steam radiates from his hair, which is all over the place. His shadow has grown in. It has been days since he shaved. On the ground are his socks. They are red from blood.

The runner is examining his foot. He has it pulled up as close to his face as he can get it. There is a quarter-sized blister on the back where the shoe meets his heel. A toenail is teetering awfully close to falling off, badly chipped and bleeding. He doesn't want to touch it. It's that fragile. Another blister near the landing spot at the front. Beyond that, there is just a general fatigue, wear and tear. These feet have been busy over the last few days.

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Due to the temperature, these toes can't stay exposed for long. He is trying to wrap some gauze around the worst of the wounds. He digs in his bag, trying to find fresh socks but can't. Instead, he reaches down and grabs the bloody socks. Slowly, he pulls them back onto his feet. There is pain in his eyes. It takes minutes to get the socks back on. He needs a break before he can continue to his shoes.

He goes for his water. It's bone dry. Then he pulls the map out. He looks around. There are no flags to mark the path. There are barely any footsteps to follow. He is fingering his way around the map, trying to figure out where he is. How much further to the next checkpoint. He needs warmth. He needs socks. It looks like he is only halfway. There is still a long journey ahead.

For a few seconds, a thought creeps in. He could pull out his GPS and end it. He could hit that button, and they would come to find him within an hour. That's the easy way out. While looking down, a tattoo slips out from under his sleeve. Not Done.

Every failure from his life cascades into his mind. The jobs he quit. The people he left behind. The people who left him behind. It's real pain. Blisters might hurt, but they always heal. The pain he is

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feeling right now is the kind that is so deeply rooted, it is attached to his central nervous system. He is shaking violently, curled up in a ball, like an addict going through detox. This is the kind of pain thinking of quitting brings to him. His body outright rejects the thought and forces him into convulsions until he can clear his mind.

He stands. Rolls up his sleeve. He doesn't care that it is freezing. He cracks his neck left and then right. Stretches out his arms. Puts wet shoes over bloody socks. Pulls on the frozen balaclava. Puts two fingers to his heart and raises them up. Then he starts running. One foot after the other.

Just another day at the office.

The Real Party

It is about a week before winter break. A couple of months have passed since the Mario Kart night.

We all wanted to get together again, but between work and school, we just couldn't find the time. Having to wait for another group night added to the anticipation.

Ashley is shrouded in mystery. I have known her for close to three months now, but she only shows up to school seemingly every second day, and when she does show up, she barely speaks. The amazing thing is she isn't getting kicked out, so she must be crushing the tests. If she valued attendance and participation, she could be a straight-A student with a scholarship to wherever she wanted. But that isn't her. She doesn't care about what others think of her. She just does what she wants. She is near impossible to

track down outside school. I'm not a nosy person, and Ashley has deflected the few times I have asked her almost anything personal.

It's around eight, Erica's orders. I let myself in and head down to the basement. Same people as last time. The black lights aren't on. I can see everything now. There are four smaller speakers around the room. The fish tank looks kind of sad in regular light. The conversation is on what music we will be listening to first. They are at an impasse and need me to break the tie.

Caleb has scored an early leak of Kanye West's *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy* from Pirate Bay and already listened to it, saying it was perfect. Ashley wants to listen to her custom mix that she describes as depressing indie folk-rock. Erica wants to listen to techno. Geoffrey likes all music. It came to me to break the tie. Kanye West isn't my favourite, but I didn't mind *808s & Heartbreak* and my gut is telling me to go with Kanye.

Someone: If I am breaking the tie, I go with Caleb and Kanye.

I get a few dirty looks.

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Erica: Fine.

Someone: So what are we playing tonight?

Erica: Oh, we aren't playing anything.

I am a little confused. I was ready for some gaming again. What the hell is she up to now? She turns off the lights, leaves the room, and comes back in a white cloak with the hood up. She is so theatrical. The black lights kicked on. Ashley's hair lit up. Erica reaches under the table and pulls out two bags of gummy candy. There aren't that many though. I could polish off a good fifty by myself, and one bag has five, the other, twenty or so. Everyone else is fixated on the gummies as if they were made of gold. My confusion is visible. She hands everyone one of the gummies from the bag with just five. They all pop them fast and look at me in anticipation. I know something is up. Maybe these are joke candies that taste funny. Or maybe mine is a laxative. They snicker and smile while I eat it.

It doesn't taste like a gummy, it is barely sweet, and a strange aftertaste lingers that I can't place. Wouldn't call that candy. Hopefully, it isn't a laxative. For the next thirty minutes or so we just talk until everyone gets up and sits around the coffee table.

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Erica picks up her gummies again and starts walking around the circle. Her hand goes into the bag almost in slow motion, like it is a ritual. She doesn't just drop them on the table. She treats the bears like they are more than just candy, setting them down directly in front of each person. She is meticulous in ensuring the bears appear to be holding hands, all facing the same direction, feet towards us. There is a level of mysticism and spiritualism in the room. Everyone gets three or four more bears, but when Erica comes to me, she pauses a little longer. I only get one. A wise decision from our shaman. Seemingly, only I am in the dark as to what is coming next.

She sits down and gets into the lotus position, her eyes closed. I had no idea she did yoga. Everyone else is in some makeshift sitting position. I keep my eyes open though. After a minute holding the pose, she reaches down and picks up the stereo remote. She holds it for another few seconds before pressing play, all the while, eyes closed.

The bass drones away. An angelic voice comes on. It repeats a few times. It's almost like the music tells them when to eat the first bears because at the moment the beat changes, they all slowly ingest, eyes still closed.

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The unmistakable voice of Kanye West comes on. I pick up my bear and examine it. Spin it along my fingers, pondering what kind of cult I have gotten myself into. Give it a sniff. I only eat half at first. Nothing special. It's time to join them, so I shut my eyes and try to get lost in the music. When the second angelic chorus comes on, I eat the other half, keeping my eyes shut. The song continues. At the end of the track, I peek around to see what is going on. They are all still sitting. Fairly motionless and eyes closed still, so I close mine again.

The trademark out-of-tune Kanye beat comes on. Another good song. The third track is *Power*. His big summer single. Everyone has heard it a dozen times by now, but it doesn't feel out of place or overly familiar. A sign that Kanye knows how to put together a full album that flows. Around this time is when the edibles kick in. I open my eyes. The posters on the wall are starting to melt. Ashley's fiery green hair is hypnotic. Erica's cloak glows more than ever. I get lost for a few songs, watching the fish weave in and out of their neon decorations. I am dizzy, but not sick. I just want to not move.

The song is *Runaway*. The simple yet mesmerizing piano intro. I am staring at a one-inch guppy that is changing between neon green and light purple. It

weaves in and out of the various pink structures and fake dark purple seaweed. The fish are slowing down. I can hear their gills. Every little movement of the fin is met with great expectations. Then, all of a sudden, the fish makes a quick break for the pink castle. It scares me back to reality. I have been gone for fifteen minutes. Once I come back. I pull out my phone and just start taking notes. After writing for a bit, Ashley comes over.

Ashley: What you doing?

I don't answer.

Ashley: You've been writing for forty-five minutes.

I still don't answer.

Ashley: Have you ever been high before?

Someone: Not like this.

She looks over. Erica is still sitting in lotus, gone from the world.

Ashley: Erica goes deep.

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Someone: No shit.

Ashley: I like it. Come on. What are you writing about?

Someone: Us. Moving here. The people I've met. This.

Ashley: Me?

Someone: Yes.

Ashley: What about me?

Someone: That you are mysterious.

Ashley: You think I am mysterious?

Someone: I know you are mysterious. It's not a thought. We have sort of known each other for three months, and I know almost nothing about you except that you keep your buds in.

Ashley: What do you want to know?

Someone: Just talk about yourself.

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Ashley: I don't do that.

Someone: Not only do you not talk about yourself, this isn't the first time I have tried. You are always gone too. Hence, you are mysterious.

She laughs.

Ashley: What specifically?

Someone: Talk about your family.

Ashley: Fine...broken home. Mom has a good job. She makes too much money. I am an only kid, and I get spoiled rotten. Whatever I want and basically no rules.

Someone: The buds?

Ashley: What?

Someone: What is the deal with the buds?

Ashley: I do that to escape reality. Numb the surroundings. Tolerate the world.

Someone: What about me?

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Ashley: I like you, but we are friends. I don't want to complicate the group. We have a good thing going. I try to keep my dating game to people outside of school. That place is a social disaster without mixing love into the equation. Besides, I know you are chasing Samantha.

Someone: Keep that quiet! It's a secret!

Ashley: Sorry.

I actually kind of agree with her though. These are the best friends I have ever had. It's one of the reasons I have been careful around Samantha. I need to make sure Caleb is okay with it. So even though I do like Ashley, I love our little ragtag team more. I just always wonder what's going on behind the eyes. Now I know a little more.

Unnoticed by me, Erica has left her lotus and is behind us. She raises her arms up to ensure she has our attention, her cloak glowing under the black lights.

Erica: I heard you mumbling. I have an observation.

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Someone: Was I mumbling?

Erica: You were definitely mumbling. My observation. Whatever you are putting in that phone right now. That's your book.

She is right. The notes I have been keeping the last few months, as well as my recent flurry of writing tonight. This is the start of something. I tell my pizza stories. We talk about family, friends, and fun. The next few hours are a mind-boggling brainstorming session of everything that has happened to us in the last few years, with me front and centre. I leave out a lot about Samantha. I'm sure they kept their secrets too. I feel amazing. I reach for my pocket. My keys are gone. I start to panic.

Erica: Your keys are hidden.

What?

Someone: Where?

Erica: You are not driving.

Someone: I am fine.

Erica: No, you are not.

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Someone: I am.

She gives me a look I have never seen from her before. I know I can't win this. I guess I am going to have to sleep it off. I don't put up a fight and I write a little while longer, then crash hard.

The next morning, I wake up and I barely remember anything. I find the note in my phone and am amazed by how much I have written. Erica has Cinnamon Toast Crunch for me and fills me in on the evening. I don't know what to think. My head is spinning a bit.

When I leave there is a present in my shoe. The note doesn't say who it is from. I think it is Ashley. She had said she was going away for a few weeks when we were talking earlier. The note just says to open when I am bored. I keep looking over at the present the whole drive home.