

It is a familiar scene, at least if you live in Nashville. Crowded honky-tonks reeking of cigarette smoke, liquor, and cheap perfume are a dime a dozen in this town. Most host other odors in turn, lofty aspirations and the subsequent desperation.

A live band belts out a rowdy, yet catchy tune. A lonely man sits in the corner nursing a rum and coke listening to music he despises because it reminds him of his lost love. He is Matthew Foster. Or is he? He tends to forget these days. *Whoever I am, I am a sonofabitch.* He downs the rest of his drink and stares at a pair of concert tickets lying on the table. He scans the room for the waitress and motions for another drink.

“Rough night, honey?” the waitress asks, leaning down closer to Matthew and removing his depleted glass. He decides a nod is sufficient response. He can’t help but notice as she walks away that her jeans are too tight to be comfortable, but she is too proud to admit that her ass has graduated to the next size. Not that she’s fat. She just has a big frame. Her ass – as viewed through liquor lenses - is quite nice, he decides.

*How the hell did I end up here, like this?* He wonders. *I should leave this dive and head out to Amsouth Amphitheater. Third Eye Blind is much more my speed.* However, he’s drunk, and he knows it. Not that he cares if he hurts himself – or even dies for that matter -, but he can’t stand the thought of hurting one more innocent person. Had he not pissed away nearly all his money on booze he could take a taxi out to the concert, but he has. Even now, the waitress is collecting the last bit of it as she situated his drink.

He samples his drink and stares through the tickets, through the table, through time. When his mind goes quiet like this, thoughts of Michelle always soon follow. Images flash like snapshots, slideshows and video clips of better times, when they were together.

Like the time when the two of them went wading the creek waters of Montgomery Bell State Park. Pant legs rolled up knee-high; they walked gingerly across the moss-slick stones submerged for countless ages. They carefully stepped against the current as they walked upstream toward the lake feeding the stream, but Michelle lost her footing and began to tumble. Matthew grabbed her and whirled around so he would soften her water landing. How they had laughed carefree afterwards, sitting on one of the stone-stepped walls flanking the creek, letting the sun slowly dry them down to damp! They stared so long into each others eyes that day. Never had he lost himself as totally as he did looking into her big brown eyes. *Something is wrong.* The perfect image of her smiling as she splashed him with water slung from her yet wet hair faded before his mind’s eye. The image evaporated. He could no longer sustain it having heard a noise that fit the bar rather than the nature scene he was desperately trying to maintain.

Reality grasps Matthew, and he realizes the sound that interrupted him was the sound of the waitress’s skin-tight pants rubbing across the vinyl as she sat down across from him. She has brought two longnecks to accompany them.

“Ashley,” the waitress says, extending her hand in formal introduction. “Care if my friends,” she points to the beers, “and I join you?”

“Actually...”

“Good. It’s been a long fuckin’ night,” she stares him up and down, “for the both of us it looks like. Every lousy toothless drunk in here has been grabbin’ all over my ass

tonight. To top it all, the one guy in here I want to grab it, hasn't even realized how nice it is!" She turns her bottle up and drinks without ever losing eye contact with Matthew.

"I noticed, but my mind is elsewhere tonight."

"No, hunny, you're right here. You might have tickets for another place," she says picking up the tickets, "but you are right here, right now." She downs more of her beer and continues, "Why don't we change that and go back to my place? My roommate's not supposed to be back until tomorrow."

*Well, I haven't been with anyone since Michelle, and that was nearly four months ago.* He surveys the woman a little closer. She has curly red locks and green eyes. She seems to be rather athletic. His eyes drop to her breasts. *A little smaller than I like. I can't believe I am actually considering this!* He shakes his head, trying to break the alcoholic daze. "I'm sorry. I can't. You see, I'm..."

"Married?" He thinks about nodding, but figures it won't fly without the ring.

"No."

"Gay?" *I'd never be able to pull that one off!*

"No."

"Then, what?" she asks, fed up with guessing.

"I'm drunk," he says. She nods. "And worse yet, my girl and I broke up awhile back, and I'm not ready to date again. Don't know if I ever will."

Ashley thinks this over, leans forward, and says, "Honey, I don't want to date you. I just want to fuck you. Most guys wouldn't have a problem with that."

"I know. I used to be the same damn way, but that's all behind me now." He stares idly into the remainder of his drink.

Several minutes go by without a word spoken by either of them. Finally, Ashley breaks the relative silence. "Well, if you're not interested in casual sex, you better at least talk to me."

"About what?" Matthew asks. The drinks have dulled his quick wit away. *What could we possibly have in common to talk about?* He wonders to himself.

"I don't know. How about you tell me about you and this girl that has totally fucked up my chances of getting any tonight?"

"It is a long story." He warns.

"Like I care. You are going to entertain me one way or another tonight, and you already made it clear that it won't be physical entertainment. So, get to talkin'."

"Fine."

"Surely she first thought I was a klutz before she formed any other opinion of me. It was my first day working at the movie theatre, and we had just been released from an employee meeting. Jeff Galloway, a fellow employee, was charged with the duty of showing me the ropes. Ahead of us walked a beautiful girl.

"She had her back to me as she was walking in the same direction. Her long dark brown hair fell in loose curls down her back. I could tell she was about six inches shorter than me, and I guessed her to weigh about a hundred and forty pounds. I wanted to get a look at her face.

"Finally, I caught a quick glimpse of her face as she turned to look over her shoulder in my direction. I was dumbstruck looking into her eyes, which were big and

brown as walnuts. She turned back around and continued walking toward the break room, releasing me from her captivating spell. 'Jeff, what's her name? She's hot.'

"She turned around again, stopped, and called Jeff's name, waving to him to catch up with her. I looked to him, waiting for his reply. 'That's my little sister, Michelle.' I didn't look away as quickly as I wanted. My mind was trying to decide what reaction was in order.

'Oh,' was all I could manage, and I looked toward her again. She was still looking back to us, waiting for her brother to join her. Probably owing in equal parts to nerves and stupidity, I smiled and ran into the concession counter.

"She couldn't help but snicker. Jeff went to talk to her as I quickly made my exit from the scene afterwards. *So much for making a good first impression! Well, at least I made obvious my best quality: my grace. Yeah, right!*

"The next day I apologized to Jeff for drooling all over his sister as I had. Shamelessly, I followed up by probing him with endless questions about her. He answered the first few. She was eighteen. She started at the theatre about three months ago. Yes, she had a boyfriend, but he was a cheating jerk.

'She asked me who you were yesterday.'

'Are you kidding? When?' He held up his hand, signaling me to slow down.

'Right after you tried to kill yourself on the concession stand. Most people open that little swinging door up before they try walking through.'

'I'll have to remember that. Back to Michelle, what did you tell her?' I asked.

'I told her your name, that it was your first day, and that you seem like a nice guy.' I could have hugged him.

"Michelle was off work the next day, but the following day our lunch breaks overlapped. We sat in the break room and talked for about fifteen minutes, the remainder of her break. That trend continued until we moved from casual acquaintances into friendship. We started taking lunch together on the days that Sam, her boyfriend, was too busy to visit with her then, which was frequently. The more we spent time together, the more we learned of each other.

"She told me much about Sam and her relationship with him. They started dating as sophomores in high school two years ago and had been together ever since. Lately, she felt he had been neglecting their relationship and thought it probable that he was being unfaithful. His warm embrace came infrequently and chilled now. It was as if his mind, body, and soul would only be warmed by the discrete master of a fire distantly burning.

"After a few weeks, I timidly showed her a few of my better poems. She said she liked them all. It meant a lot to gain her approval, and her opinion began to cast a radiant shadow over the poems I was working on. I started to write for an audience of one: Sweet Michelle.

"She took to critiquing my new poems each day, figuring rightly more and more that she was the inspiration behind them. It flattered her, and she confessed that she wished Sam would write poems for her.

"Her heart was breaking because she was torn between denial and deserved doubts about her boyfriend. Though she tried to hide her rarely shed tears when they came, I watched over her. Her tears were increasingly dried by my romantic rhymes praising her every admirable trait. The poems trickled out at first. As I nurtured the

mental image of my muse they began to flow faster until I had created a river of love to rush over the aching wounds of her heart. The act of writing poetry was soothing to me, and I knew that if she was even half as comforted by the reading she would heal from heartache with barely a scar.

“She remained true to Sam, holding me to the friendship territory that borders love. Secretly, I wished not only to immigrate into the land of her love but also to usurp its current king. I knew that if a coup was to be successful it had to be well-planned and unveiled at the proper time.

“By the middle of September, my friend Heath Daniels had moved in with me. He agreed to pay one hundred a month in rent and help buy groceries.

“Heath was also an internet junkie, so when I was not online or on the phone, he was online. The WebTV was hooked up to the television in my room. Most nights Heath sat in the chair at the foot of my bed and chatted until I woke up. Since I did not have a car at the time, Heath would give me a ride to the theatre when he was able.

“At first, his late night keyboard banging would wake me up at least twice a night. By the end of the first week, I either adjusted to it or he took to typing with more stealth. At any rate, it no longer bothered me.

“By this time Michelle and I were talking on the phone almost an hour every night in addition to our shared time at work. Still, we were friends, and so we would remain until their relationship crumbled. It was obvious to everyone else, if not to Michelle, that the attraction was mutual. Though we had not so much as held hands, kissed, or engaged in any further act of affection, a relationship was in bloom. Its nature was platonic and pure and blessed with the promise of only reaching higher and higher peaks and plateaus. She loved me, whether she would state it aloud at the time. I knew her heart, so I was not hurt when she refused to say the words.

“It was about this time that my grandmother, with whom I was very close, passed away. I had gone over to mom’s house- she had been taking care of grandma- to pay my respects, but she passed away before I arrived.

“I hurried in, and someone hugged me and remarked how she was in a better place and no longer suffering. All words seemed trite to me, meaningless. The hospice nurse called the coroner’s office. I was numb. I didn’t want to talk nor listen to anyone. I didn’t want attempts at comfort that I knew would fail. I went off into the kitchen and sat alone in the floor with my notebook and pen.

“Writing poetry brought me as much comfort as was really possible. The poem was an ode to my grandma, and as I sat writing it, I swear I could hear grandma’s voice talking with the people in the other room. Her voice was loud and distinct, yet her words were distorted beyond translation. I heard the stretcher wheel out grandma’s body, and I could see the men pushing it pass the dining room window.

“The rest of the day is a blur. I cannot remember another detail up until I got up the next morning. It was then that mom suggested I get out and try to take my mind off of things. I took the cordless phone to the den, which was the only empty room I could find, and I called Michelle. Her mom answered the phone but quickly fetched her for me.

“‘Hello?’ Michelle’s voice soothed my saddened soul instantly. She had to repeat herself before I compiled a reply.

“‘Hey, it’s Matt.’ I said.

“Hey, what’s up? I was getting worried about you. I tried to call you last night, but you weren’t home.’ she said.

“My grandma passed away yesterday.’ I thought about my choice of words. *Does “passed away” really make me feel any less sorrow than “died”?* No.

“Oh God, I am sorry, Matthew.’

“Yeah. Well, I have a favor to ask of you.’ She asked if there was anything she could do, so I asked her for what I needed most. ‘Will you please go with me to the visitation and the funeral? I’ve never lost anyone close to me before, and it would mean a lot to me if you were there with me.’

“She hesitated but agreed. We talked on, deciding on the details until she had to get ready for work. Next, I called the theatre and let them know that I would not be in to work tonight or tomorrow.

“That evening, Michelle drove me to the visitation. She sat in the back row while I spoke with family members. My half-brothers, Robbie and Donnie, whom I had not seen in years, were there. Relations more distant would walk up to view grandma’s body for a few minutes and then roamed around solemnly talking with others.

“Off and on, someone would break into tears, and they would be comforted by those in the vicinity. Usually, this followed their viewing of the body. I dreaded it myself, so much so that I almost didn’t go up. I took a few steps in the direction, thought better of it, and paused. My feet felt as if they were glued to the ugly carpet. I turned, instinctively, to Michelle, but she was not there. I began to panic. I didn’t want to break down and cry. The panic pangs of abandonment subsided as Michelle gently grabbed my arm.

“I’ll walk up with you,’ she offered.

“Her boyfriend, Travis, gave her hell about being out with me that night, though it was in no way an evening of leisure. He told her that he didn’t want her hanging around with me anymore, but she refused to give up me and my friendship as he wanted. She would not abandon me even though she risked further strain on her relationship.

“The funeral was held the next day, and though it was not my first, it was the first funeral for anyone close to me. Just after noon Michelle and I pulled up to Chiles-Cooper Funeral Home once again. As I got out of the car I could see my breath before me. Michelle had on a black dress that was very conservative to what she usually wore, and I wore black jeans and a black and gray checkered shirt.

“As soon as we were inside someone approached me, asking if I would be a pallbearer. I agreed, and the man pinned a white flower in my pocket and guided me toward the front, away from Michelle. Michelle took her seat in the back. I was pained by the separation. Michelle was my comfort, my security.

“Before the service was concluded, I was asked to read the poem that I had written for grandma right after her death. I walked to the podium on numb legs. My heart was already hurting, tears on standby and ready to fall at any time. I was shaking so back that I couldn’t ready the piece of paper, so I laid it down on the podium. The words would not come out of my mouth. I searched out Michelle’s face, and I cleared my throat.

“No more than three lines into the poem, I was interrupted by my great aunt Thelma. Rather rudely, I thought, she yelled out, ‘Speak up! We can’t hear you.’ I cleared my throat once again and began anew, this time louder. It was hard reading emotional words I had written when I was numb now that I had “thawed” from my big

chill. If not for Michelle, I would have trailed off in tears mid-poem.

“The words I read were words I did not entirely believe. I talked of ‘serene sleep’ and a place called ‘Heaven’. I spoke of grandma meeting ‘God, her maker’. These words meant nothing to me. All I knew, all I could convince myself, was that grandma was hurting no more. I knew that morning when I woke up that I had lost my faith, but what good would it have done to vocalize this fact to my grieving family? It would only further hurt their hearts, so I remained silent on the matter. I poured all the loving thoughts of grandma into peaceful, poetic words to comfort her surviving clan.

“Michelle and I rode separately to the cemetery since I was a pallbearer. As I stepped out of the car, which had traveled directly behind the hearse, snowflakes began to fall. The ground was hard and unforgiving as I prepared to help grandma’s body to its final resting place. My mind flashed back to all the times, as grandma’s health deteriorated, that she had held onto my arm, trusting me to help her from point A to point B. The sensation differed that day. Rather than her hand holding onto my arm, it was my hands holding the cold metal railing of her coffin.

“Death became real to me that day. I envied everyone around me because they could find comfort in their religion. They had God, and all I had was my friend Michelle’s hand to hold to anchor me. How would I hold up as time passed?

“I stood before Michelle’s car, waiting for her to unlock the doors, and I turned to look one last time to my grandma. It began to play in my mind what death meant to me. I saw it in my mind’s eye as time-lapse photography. Cold, hard dirt changing to moist mud filled with worms other bugs seeking to penetrate the coffin to feast on decomposing remains that would one day remain no more. Flesh leaving a gradually emerging skeleton. The horror of it all made me want to rush back to the grave and beg them not to commit it to the ground. *Click.*

“Michelle helped me into the car and insisted on buying me lunch. She could tell that I wasn’t ready to be alone with my thoughts just yet.

**{{{insert lunch scene involving michelle, matthew, and heath.... Heath’ homosexuality is first introduced. Travis and another girl are eating at the same restaurant and kissing. Brings about the breakup of travis and michelle}}}}}**

“Days passed and I went back to work at the theatre, but my life did not settle down. Heath and the landlady had gotten into it, and she told him he had a week to be out. After he moved out, I filled the half-emptied apartment with the sadness and anger festering inside me. Though I was in love with a true angel, God was nowhere in sight. The only times I was happy was in Michelle’s company. Alone, I was a wreck. I cleaned compulsively, breaking only for bouts of tears. If we are God’s children, it was during those first days back that I felt the umbilical cord cut.

“I studied over abstract ideas, obsessed with finding meaning that could be applied to my meaningless existence. Religion comforted my family, but I had turned in my faith and replaced it with reason. I cannot put it any better than I did in the following journal entry:

‘What proofs have I that any religion is right? That any god exists? That right and wrong exist outside of the perceptions of the majority? None! I have always done my best to be moral, yet as my disillusionment grows my Christian

upbringing and its taught morality fades away from me. I am left empty, confused, but keenly aware that I am on the verge of some major insight and life change....

....My mind, soul, and body reek of restlessness. The road calls out to me. If Michelle would travel with me and I had place to stash my stuff, I would jump off this financial rat trap that life is proving to be and just travel. We would wander wherever we desired.'

“Looking over my journal from those days helps me understand myself better. Though I thought I was writing nuggets of truth and understanding, I wasn't. I was rationalizing to myself. I was oblivious to the fact that nearly every other sentence was bullshit. Sure I was hurt. So what? Everyone has to deal with it. My mistake was compounding my depression by following the conclusions of faulty logic. I lived by the worldview of a blind man.

“When Michelle and I were together, I was a whole different person. I was love's perfect fool. She was the fountain of happiness for me, and I was a child running around trying to catch every falling drop. We went to the movies often. Sometimes we would go fishing.

“At least once, we had dinner with her family. I remember being so nervous. I wanted them to like me so bad. Her mother was nice enough, but her father, it seemed to me, didn't really like me that much. Anyways, wherever we were at didn't really matter, I was happy because she was there with me.

“For my birthday, she got me a nice ink pen inscribed ‘Love Always, Michelle’. I still carry it to this day, a relic of a bygone romance. Many poems have I written with that pen. She was always thoughtful like that and could find the perfect gift.

“You have to forgive me if I don't dwell long on these fond memories. The good times are the hardest to remember, because they bring with them the unending hurt of times that are beyond return. Just know that it was our Golden Moment, the apex of bliss and happiness. A shrink would probably have a field day with me knowing I said that I was happiest and most melancholy during the same period, but it is true, however paradoxical it seems.

“I had a wonderful girl, and additionally, I had several close friends to help me through the hard times. Heath was still there for me of course.

**{}{}{}{introduce Annie character Annie same person that took matthew's virginity when he was 13.}}}}**

“Annie looked over me after Michelle went home at nights. Heath didn't hang out much at the apartment after his falling out with the landlady.

*Rewrite this para.* “As December 1997 was drawing to a close, Michelle and I had still not been intimate. I had only had one prior sexual encounter, and that was when I was thirteen. In all honesty, I couldn't wait to make love to Michelle, yet I was afraid. Our relationship was perfect up to that point, and I didn't want anything to sway the delicate

balance. Looking back, I wish we had waited longer than we did. Perhaps, in doing so, we could have prolonged the Golden Moment.