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Pieces of Sunshine

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in media res

last night—john asks me: what do you call an epiphany on steroids?

we’re smoking a bowl, sitting in a car parked a block down from his house in a gated community in brookside. the name of the community is nostalgia, though the situation—john having to sneak out of his house, hotboxing a car on a quiet residential street—does remind me of high school, the feeling i get is less nostalgic and more desperate.

john has just been released from the hospital after days of being shuttled from emergency rooms to private hospitals to psych wards. he says, they have me on some medications. i don’t know what. they said i can’t drink. but they didn’t say anything about smoking. you think i’ll be fine?

i nod. i ask him what happened. what rumors are true?

john says, i don’t know what people are saying. what are people saying?

last week, john went to his old high school during first period and was acting crazy and got kicked out. true. john went on a coke binge and got arrested. false. after getting kicked out of the high school john hopped on a plane to la to see tyrone, but only made it the airport before his muttering and shouting got him taken to an emergency room. true. this was all the result of withdrawal from meth. false. john humped a rubber ducky in front of his mom. true.

i say, i knew you weren’t on drugs. you weren’t even smoking weed.

john says, i was drinking a lot, and not sleeping. like at all. for three days.

john says, i was literally possessed by demons, man. i think they’ve been following me my whole life. i was really spoiled as a little kid.

john says, all the anger and pain that stockton is causing jodie, with everyone still doing the same shit, how no one is paying attention to signs, to each other, just came through to him and something snapped.

john says, it was a wake up call. john says it was an epiphany on steroids.

john says, man, i’m high as fuck. lifted. i really needed that. i haven’t smoked in two weeks. thanks man. i got to go back in, my parents have me on lockdown. he hops out the car and goes inside his house, acutely reminding me of high school, the smoke trailing him a distance into the cold fog before dissipating.

exposition

this is, mostly, a story about a dead girl i never met.

jodie died almost exactly two years ago here in stockton. she was seventeen years old. she worked at mr. pickles sandwich shop, the one by the mail down the street. she was a straight a student at lincoln high school. she was the kind of girl that you could call drunk for a ride at three in the morning and slept get out of bed to come get you. she was popular without being mean, smart without being antisocial, a loving daughter, a caring friend, perfect in every way. she was like sunshine.

for about a month before she died she had been heavily abusing drugs to cope with boy troubles. so her body was already weak the night she mixed an indeterminate number of pills and alcohol at a party and died, leaving behind her grieving parents and friends, a gravestone always filled with flowers.

jodie died seven months before i came to stockton—seven months before i got into this university and left my home and drove for one week, thousands of miles, across the country, affirming manifest destiny, aiming for the pacific ocean of my ancestors, echoing or at least attempting to kerouac and steinbeck and the literary tradition of westward migration, and stopped two hours short; and that is how i think of stockton: two hours, one hundred miles short of the pacific. seven months separated her death and my arrival. it is not that the dead fade away; they are buried by the continuing struggles and triumphs of everyday.
and surfing and school, the minutiae outshining the pain. seven months of healing and remembering and crystalizing these descriptions and stories and memories, lionizing the dead, making her so angelic and good and tragic that it becomes hard to think of her as human.

the reason that i not only know this much about a dead girl i never met but also choose to write a story about her is john. john is a student at this school and a native of this city and one of my best friends. he reminds me of a character in a japanese manga; a face that is all angular lines, short hair that sticks up as though he were drawn. he is one of those kids that never built a filter, screaming obscenities in public, acting out in class. adhd to the max but a family that doesn't believe in pills. he was one of jodie's best friends, although perhaps twenty different people have claimed that to me at one point or another.

halfway through writing the first draft of this story i realized that it was also largely about john. it was not really the process of writing it that made me realize this, but rather his disappearance and breakdown which fell exactly on the second anniversary of jodie's death. the rumors were flying at full speed by the time i heard them. john is on meth; john is in socal; john is in the hospital. again i am last to the scene, picking up the pieces, realizing that this is all much more about john than me. jodie makes me question things, write stories; jodie makes john break down crying, have a week long panic attack.

so this is a story about jodie, and a story about john, and stockton, and drugs about death and life, youth, sorrow, and maybe above all ennui.

but of course you can already tell that despite the fact that i never met jodie, that i am on the periphery of the stockton drug scene, that i am not capable of feeling as much as john, this is also, selfishly, cowardly, necessarily, a story about me.

two hours short of the pacific everyone is miserable here. at this school, in this city, the most common topic of conversation is how miserable it is, how bad everyone wants to get out.

people cope with misery in different ways. my choice has always been drugs self medication. i grew up in a sleepy mid atlantic suburb with a great police department—the only drugs we could find were either at rite aid or deep in the ghetto of the city. when i was fourteen i was doing cough syrup to see god, dramamine to hear things, nutmeg to feel stoned, weed to feel normal. when i was sixteen and started driving i drove to the city to get heroin a few times but i saw the pain i brought and stopped.

in stockton, the drug market is exponentially more diverse and cheaper: if i had gone to high school here i would never have graduated. imagine being introduced to ecstasy as an eighth grader instead of a college freshman. i'd have been doing crack freshman year; tweak the next, dropped out by sixteen. this is what everyone i meet in stockton tells me. one of my dealers tells me he got kicked out of school when they found a gun in his locker. mary talks about rolling in class, wiping her sweaty palms on the chalkboard when she was called up.

mary is a stockton native, then and now fucking one of my best friends from this school who has since dropped out. mary is a former tweaker you can see it in her teeth. mary is another one who says that she was one of jodie's best friends, mary says she has done pretty much every drug imaginable with jodie. she says that even though a bunch of kids from school say that jodie was their best friend, she knew the real jodie, who was doing all kinds of drugs everyday, xanax, ecstasy, coke, meth, and keeping it a secret.

john tells me that mary is probably telling the truth, but maybe not.
John says Jodie died of a broken heart. John says that Mary is still miss her, and I obligatorily listen, pretending that we are really bonded. She talks about Jodie, about what she was like, about how much she loved her. Then she reads the note, and she obligatorily listens and asks me if I’m a student. I say I am. He hands me a piece of paper, saying, you like that, try to share at your school. I read it on the beach. The words make too much sense. The note frames Spring Break, frames everything. I have transcribed it here, in the appendix. When I tell John this story the next day, he says it was a sign from Jodie telling me to pay attention to the sea. I have it in my ear and then sucking my dick.

Spring break, freshman year—I leave stockton with my friend Andy who is spending the break at a relative’s house in Northern. I bum a ride to Santa Barbara where I will meet up with John and his friends. At a gas station in half moon bay a wild looking bum comes up to me and asks me if I’m a student. I say I am. He hands me a piece of paper, says, you like that, try to share at your school. I read it on the beach. The words make too much sense. The note frames Spring Break, frames everything. I have transcribed it here, in the appendix, when I tell John this story and read him the note he says it was a sign from Jodie telling me to pay attention to the sea.

Later, after meeting up with John in Santa Barbara, popping a pill at his friend’s house, drinking vodka, surfing, walking around the amusement park that is a party house, instead of rides you have parties, instead of concession stands you have kegs, instead of skee ball you have eight balls, I find myself in a girl named Catherine’s car, from Stockton. There is a mug of vodka in the cup holder, and we drive south to San Diego, and he says that Jodie always talks to him like that, that he always sees signs, that when the sun shines briefly through a hole in the clouds or washes the sky over the Pacific Ocean pink and orange and red, psychedelic colors, that’s Jodie saying that it’s ok. It’s going to be. I’m watching out for you. I always got your back. John looks at me straight in the eye and says Jodie’s got you, too, Jun. I’m watching out for you. I always got your back. John looks at me straight in the eye and says Jodie’s got you, too, Jun. I’m watching out for you. I always got your back.

The next day John and his friends leave me on the side of PCH in Laguna Beach. They head inland to the oc for a night and then back to stockton, as two of them have work. Wanting to make the most of my break I head north to the coast for surfing. I try to hitchhike but it’s a dangerous neighborhood late at night, waiting for the metro to downtown LA where I wander through what I later find out is a dangerous neighborhood late at night, waiting for the bus to Venice, and I call my friend who has an iphone and she looks up what the street is called and tells me that I should call her brother.

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online for me and tells me that the next bus is not for three hours, sober, content, burning in the south-ern california sun which is already hot in march, a stark contrast to the grey pallor of stockton. i lie on benches at night, huddled, wishing for some marijuana to fall out of the sky and help me fall asleep, but also appreciating the sobriety after the craziness of santa barbara and san diego. i think—and when the three days are up i return to stockton reluctantly and miraculously, walking into the apple store to use facebook to find andy's number, calling him from a payphone outside a restaurant, navigating los angeles's bus system to northridge where i sleep, or at least close my eyes, lying huddled next to a wall in a shopping mall parking complex, and when andy pulls into the designated gas station at ten in the morning the sun is shining and i thank jodie the way john tells me to, whether or not my salvation was her doing and it's the sunday before classes start and andy drives smoothly on the five to the door of my dorm.

fried this past fall, but still warm, in the dark, empty parking lot of a strangely generic strip mall in some nameless suburb of sacramento, we're hotboxing mary's car, waiting on drugs, as if there's anything else you wait for in parking lots, and the vaguely tweaked out white kid sitting next to me in mary's car scratches his head and smokes a cigarette at the same time as the white kid's pupils are dilated and i sit there high and wonder what he's on and he says he is still kind of frying dude, he ate a ten strip this morning, you know, and just fried all day, man, and somehow through his rambling frying thoughts, despite his clouded, tripping brain or maybe because of it, jodie shines through from that other plane of existence that the acid has opened him to and he says, man, that was fucked up what happened to jodie, huh? just fucking covered for themselves. whose house was it? mary says it was ron pitt's house. the kid sneers. yeah, fucking ron pitt, man, didn't want to man up and take her to the fucking hospital, let her die in a bathtub. you don't understand, says mary, raising her voice. it was fucked up. what happened. they put her in the bathtub at first because she was... you know... and her voice cracks and she stops. that's so dumb, i say, that's a horrible thing to do to someone who's OD'ing, she probably wouldn't have died, even if they didn't take her to the hospital, if they didn't put her body into shock like that. i know, says mary, but they didn't know that. they just panicked. i mean it was just a really sad situation. no one knew what to do. they put her in the bed, i guess when they figured out that it was that bad, and she died in his bed. the kid screams again, and nothing happened to ron fucking pitt, he says, because he's some rich kid from brookside and jodie fucking died in his bed, jodie's dead, man, he says, like it happened last week and not last year. and we sit there in silence smoking the blunt until the kids connect pulls up in a dark corner of the parking lot and the kid runs into the other car with our money and returns with a zip-lock bag full of white powder and he says this is some pure mdma, man, straight from the chemist, man, and we drive him somewhere to drop him off and a few minutes later on we figure out that the molly was cut with salt.

when i tell john this story, partying the next weekend in san luis obispo at cal poly's 'week of welcome' he says it was obviously just another sign from jodie and the sign was that the drug deal was bad, the whole thing, it's all bad, dude. get out of the game, man, figure it out, jun. he says, you just met ron pitt tonight. he's a nice guy. it wasn't his fault. it wasn't anyone's fault. oh, that ron guy, that was him? damn. john looks at me. who cares about all that though? we're in fucking These Are My Friends Lia Santini These Are My Friends
slo, man, the beach is right there, everyone walking down the street is drunk and beautiful. he finds me a beer.

aside here are my experiences with death.

my maternal grandmother died of pancreatic cancer two months after i was born. there are pictures of her holding me. there are no memories of her. i have been to her grave three times—it is in china, on the other side of the world.

an old french man who sponsored my mother’s student visa died after a stroke when i was in middle school. i saw him comatose in the icu. i also saw him a few days later, looking at me and waving. i think he really was telling me something, if i should listen, until finally a girl sitting next to me and starts talking to me about raves and college and how much pain he had caused, if he rationalized the way i did, that selling drugs was spreading happiness, how much pain i had caused, if jodie was actually an angel, sent to this realm to help, to heal, and that their friend, ian, who sells coke and steals, who didn’t cry at her funeral, might be the devil incarnate. that they sit on his shoulders like a cartoon. and mine too. that i’ve been listening to zack.

jesus, man, the beach is right there, every girl walking down the street is beautiful—i feel as though i am losing my grip on something.

i figure out later, via facebook, that the girl in vegas’s birthday is the same day jodie died. i can’t decide what this means, can’t figure out what jodie is trying to tell me. go for it? follow your heart? or stop listening to the drugs and falling in love with every pretty girl that you roll with?

when i tell john this story he says that he is sick of telling me to figure it out. he is driving me to the airport for me to go home for winter break. he says if i don’t figure it out soon it will be too late.

the end i wish i could tell you that this story ends well. that danny’s mixtape gets hyped and he gets signed to some major rap label and his first album, dedicated to jodie, breaks the billboard top two hundred. that catherine finds what she is looking for, that everyone, all of us do. that mary stops using drugs and gets out of stockton and becomes a nurse. that john pulls it together, figures it out, isn’t too damaged by whatever he is going through right now, that he doesn’t relapse into a psychotic state. that john is doing well, hopping on his board, screaming at the sky. on the ride back to stockton we take pch as far as possible to keep the sea to our side and eventually the sun comes out and john explains to me that jodie was actually an angel, sent to this realm to help, to heal, and that their friend, ian, who sells coke and steals, who didn’t cry at her funeral, might be the devil incarnate. that they sit on his shoulders like a cartoon. and mine too. that i’ve been listening to zack.

i no longer hear voices. the stereo on my car has blown out—another overwrought metaphor for something.
and becomes who he wants to be, that he lets go of jodie enough to let go but not enough to forget. that ten years from now, when everyone is in a good place with kids and mortgages and jobs, faded tattoos and scars, people still miss jodie and toast to her because memory doesn’t dull with time, because tattoos mean something, because people can live on in the hearts of loved ones.

that her ghost teaches me a valuable lesson, and i turn my life around. that telling this story brings me clarity and purpose.

and the story could still end that way and i hope it does. but it is not that kind of story because it is happening now, because you are reading it in a college workshop and not a bookstore, because even though i have not yet broken my new year’s resolution to stop doing and selling drugs it is only january, because danny’s mixtape drops tomorrow and john is sitting at his house on tranquilizers and anti-schizoids and mary just did some cocaine at a party last weekend, because of the million different ways everything could turn out from here, just like the million different ways they could have turned out then.

jodie’s story is over now, set on a stone tablet in a quiet corner of a stockton cemetery, embellished with flowers and letters and tears, sealed with blunts smoked in her name, beer from forties spilled on the ground. but the point of all of this effort, these words spilled, pages rambled, cigarettes smoked and coffee drank, sleep delayed, is that her story is inevitably, necessarily the rest of their stories, and though, or maybe even because i never met her, my story as well. the point is all of the things that john taught me, all of the things that bum scribbled and photocopied—that we are all connected, stardust, plur, the ocean, all you need is love—that these cliches, drug epiphanies, chance meetings, missed connections, rare love, breakups and blackouts and breakups are building up to something more than the sum of days, something taller than tallies of cigarettes and drinks and pills and nights, something good, something true, something clearer than the haze, anything at all.

jodie doesn’t appear to me as often as she used to, at odd times and places, and i don’t know if it’s because i stopped doing drugs and she stopped having to talk to me, or because even a special person like her, an angel, a spirit as constant and warming as sunlight, fades away after awhile.

appendix

the sea and the ocean questions us daily journal “opinion” march 1st 2010 -name signed in illegible handwriting

*spelling mistakes, unfinished quotation marks, grammatical errors etc. left in place. capitalization changed.

in some ways in living we are left out from the true ideas of what we are as a “whole body” in the constitution of nations that purpose is twisted by relationships and judgements that don’t answer the worlds questions as to; “am i helping or hurting society by my actions? is giving the real solution? and why don’t people love themselves first before trying to fix everybody else’s opinions and facts to what matters are? is what we really know or understand to be just a combination or connection to lossing our creativity as technology deforms our brains functions and the beauty of the individuality we are as human beings as we live on how do we not let “history” repeat itself and how much tried and spaced, so we need to stop speaking about the word “change” which really means substitute. the nature of disputes involving the past and present doesn’t have a line humans can draw or pay for to correct or does it? simply speaking in relation to how nature rules, “humans are no different than the sea, it always has to run to the ocean, which is the biggest body of mass that will ever exist, so like the ocean, we must respect. maybe we should start respecting and honoring ourselves first and then all we see in everything else that exists will live in peace and harmony, which only starts at “one” “i” and thats solving the question to life, who am i? am i you? am i we? and can i figure out how we are to be and live together before it’s too late to know the difference in what we see in the oceans great mystery. “love sees us in the oceans light, to shine on. and see how life’s greatness can be known, that is the answer how the sea and the ocean are no different than all of us. we all go together in the end in the pieces puzzle to the greatest mass that exists. into a whole body but not the piece of fish that conveys itself as the ocean. that is another story. 52

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