

*Wish You Were Here*  
a memoir  
by  
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I had a reoccurring dream. There was a big field, the wind was blowing, and a leafless tree stood in the distance. It was a good dream. And I remember I had this same dream over and over and over. When I woke up, the dream dissipated with a feeling that there was still hope and beauty in the world. That life could be as I wanted it to be.

My waking hours were not as I wanted them to be. I was twenty four, living in San Francisco, far from home, surrounded by nothing but strangers and acquaintances who, as much as I tried to befriend them, were always coming up short. Why was I there? My dad drove us out there to move in with the girl I loved and who, I thought, loved me. I remember traveling west on I-80, listening to electronic music, the thrum of the bass in the music like a heartbeat in the night. On the afternoon of the third day, we drove across the Bay Bridge and arrived at the apartment on Palm Avenue in the Richmond District. My dad stayed the night and left the next morning.

She dumped me a month later on Valentine's day. I had bought her a bar of fancy chocolate with pistachios and because I couldn't really cook, I had plans of making a big salad with chicken and romaine lettuce. There was wine too. And I had it all set up for her so when she returned from her work in Marin County, it would be ready. I had forgotten bread and flowers so I left a note and left the house. I came home to find her crumpled and crying on the living room floor. I asked her what the hell was going on.

"I don't love you anymore," she had said.

She kicked me out and all I wanted to do was write about it because I had moved there leaving my friends and family and that bitch that I loved so much just decided she

didn't want me anymore. I moved in with a couple of University of San Francisco students, one was a graphic designer, the other a Wells Fargo bank executive and on the weekends a never ending party of clubs, drinking and techno music ensued with Saturday morning hangovers sweated out on runs to the beach. I worked at the Fog City Diner waiting tables. And after pouring Napa wine and serving salmon BLTs to business people in the Financial District all week, in the evenings I brought my laptop to cafés and jotted notes and ideas into my journal. I remember my only friends, aside from my roommates, were the *mexicanos* who worked as bussers at the diner, but I distanced myself from everyone preferring the writing to pass the hours. I needed to document the feeling I carried because I believed that eventually this pain would shift to an equal joy. I scribbled, and documented the days, and I was glad that I at least had words.

I would spend hours at the University of San Francisco gymnasium pounding the bag. I wrapped my hands in cloth and punched a heavy bag hanging from the ceiling. It was a way of transferring the emotions I felt, to punish the pain with repeated blows. I'm sure USF students heard my grunts and groans down the hall and thought there was some sort of freak in there. But they didn't know I was trying to rid myself of the cloud, trying to blow away the fog that loomed over the Richmond District everyday. I would leave these workouts high off the endorphins, but stern-eyed and feeling empty. Women checked me out in those days, but I was ashamed of my thinning hair and the relentless acne which never seemed to diminish after my adolescence, and none of them could ever compare to the girl who cut my heart out and fried it on Valentine's day. I paid girls little mind anyway. Of course they were beautiful, but they were a distraction from my writing. Besides, I was reeling so hard from a girl's gut-punch I didn't want anything to

do with them. I didn't hate them, I just didn't trust them anymore. And I only knew that for the writing to be good, I couldn't be distracted.

A distraction soon came. One Wednesday, my manager asked if I would like to work as a banquet server, and with nothing else to do, the prospect of making a little extra cash sounded fine. I had only to open bottles of wine and serve *hors d'oeuvres* before the performance and at intermission. I saw her when I retreated for a smoke. The first cigarette I'd had in months. She leaned on a pillar at the Metropolitan Opera House foyer. It was peculiar because it was during the show, Wynton Marsalis playing flugelhorn with the San Francisco Symphony, and here she was alone, missing the entire thing. Her back was turned to me, her hair done up carefully, and her black dress tied at the neck with the strings draping down. She turned and noticed me there. She asked for a cigarette, but I didn't have one because I had bummed mine from a fellow waiter. I offered to share it with her, but she declined.

"Why are you out here?" I asked after a moment.

"Because my date sucks," she said.

"Forget about the date," I said. "It's Wynton Marsalis. Isn't he like the best trumpet player in the world?" She didn't care. She said she had seen him already, with her mother, at the Lincoln Center in New York. "He's great, but I'm tired," she said with a bored sigh. "Tired of entertainment and tired of people."

"I know how that can be."

"What do you do?" She asked, drawing her eyes over my outfit.

“I’m a waiter right now, as you can see, but I’m also a writer,” I told her. “That’s what I got my degree in. I wait by day, write by night. What I want to do is travel the world and write about it.”

“Oh yeah?” She said. “Have you published anything?”

“Well... No. Not yet.” I said.

She smirked. “So what’re you writing about?”

“About a d.j.” I said. “A techno d.j. who plays dance music and travels from one city to the next. But I don’t know whether he should travel in Europe or America. And I don’t know really know what’s going to happen. All I know is that it starts with him getting in a car wreck and he doesn’t die but the rest of the story leads up to that. We don’t know if it’s attempted suicide, or if someone was trying to kill him, or if it was just an accident. But he works his ass off playing music every night and searches for something in these exotic cities. It’s a work in progress.”

I didn’t want to go too far into it because if there was one thing I learned in school, it was how incredibly boring people’s ideas can sound. Someone had once called such rantings *verbal previews* and that stuck with me. And to tell about this d.j., this character I had in my head, and an idea for a story that was not complete, was a good way to get people to tune me out. I wanted this character to be successful, but in his strivings he misses out on something important. I liked the idea of the kid missing out on the love of his life for the love of his craft. But I didn’t tell this to the girl, because it was a cliché and it needed work and I didn’t want to bore this smoking hot girl presently playing hooky from her date, leaning beautifully on one of the opera house pillars outside the foyer enveloped in this glamorous and expensive black dress with the cut down the back.

“Sounds cool.” She said. For some very weird reason I asked her if she believed in God. She hesitated and then didn’t answer. I tried explaining myself.

“I want my protagonist to be Catholic. Someone committed and devoted to the idea of Christ. To the suffering.”

“So you think God *wants* us to suffer?” She asked.

“Sometimes I think it’s the only way we can get something done.” She stood there like she couldn’t believe the conversation had gone this way.

“So you think suffering will get you there? That sucks.”

“No,” I said. “I’m just telling you what I believe.”

“Well, I don’t know. I know that I see beauty in my life. And that I believe I have some purpose.”

“Yeah.” I was glad again. That was something that I believed too. The unexplainable image of a home with a swimming pool overlooking the ocean appeared in my mind. There were palm trees. And I knew the image cast before me was from a place I would one day inhabit. I wanted to share this image with her. I wanted this girl to join me. I wanted her to know that I understood her. But I didn’t tell her. I was afraid she would consider me a materialist. I only wanted to share one of my visions. How cool would it have been to be like: *Yeah so do you want to get into my BMW coupe and drive to my house by the beach where I can rub your ankles until you fall asleep? My mind stopped. Why was I wasting time there where she might be discovered with me? Where her date might pull her back into the theater? What are you doing? Leave with her.*

“Look. Would you like to go somewhere? A café or something.” She looked around. She brought her hand to her shoulder. She felt her dress there. She looked down. A concerned and worried look passed over her face. “What? What’s going on?”

“My brooch,” she said. “It’s gone.”

“Your brooch? What did it look like?”

“A bee. A big... A big, like, honeybee. I can’t believe I didn’t feel it drop. It was my grandmother’s.”

“A bee? Did you leave it in the theater?”

“Well it isn’t out here.” She snapped. After a moment’s thought she looked at me as if a thought was passing through her. “I’m going back to find it.”

“Okay, I’ll wait here.” I said and I did not realize how incredibly stupid it sounded until I watched her turn and scurry up the red carpet stairs. The image of her hand and dark red nails grasping the brass banister burned into my mind before she disappeared around the corner.

I waited. The rest of the show continued on and she did not emerge. My fellow diner waiters had already thrown away the ice, pulled the linen tablecloths off the tables, and stored the wine and leftover calamari, carpaccio, crabcakes, and chicken skewers, into the coolers to bring back to the restaurant. The others agreed to leave without me once they saw my eyes.

“Go.” Todd, one of the waiters, commanded by dramatically raising his thick eyebrows a few times behind his glasses. “Don’t think I don’t know it when I see it. We’ll take it from here.”

“Do you work tomorrow?” Brian, the egotistical musician asked, pulling the last dirty linen tablecloth away from one of the extended tables in the foyer, like it was something no rock star should have to do.

“Tomorrow night.” I said. They had set aside and packed away the rest of the food and condiments to be carried off to the parking lot where the white diner truck waited. My coworkers left me and I waited in the lobby in my white undershirt and black pants, bowtie and uniform stuffed into my backpack.

An hour later, when the symphony had finished, I stood on a chair over the emerging masses of black and white, diamonds, pearls, and platinum. But I didn't see her shiny long black hair, nor was there a sign of her in the mingling groups standing on the main entrance steps where the tuxedoed and glamorously dressed ducked into taxis, limousines, and black luxury vehicles that reflected the yellow lamplights and flashed away into the night. I waited until the last car had gone and I bummed another cigarette from a skateboarder off the street before pulling out my headphones to begin the walk home.

I wondered why God punished people like this. What the hell had I done wrong? Was I ugly? Foolish? Was it the God talk? I felt like a strong wind had knocked me over like a dead tree in a big field. Coming to the conclusion that it was a combination of my thin hair and my unglamorous occupation as a banquet server, I decided I would never even try to associate with the so-called upper crust again.

“Leave them to their symphonies and fancy clothes and stupid bumblebee brooches.” I said out loud as I crossed the street in front of the opera house. “No feeling, no ideas of true love, nothing but wasted lives.” This tirade didn't do much for me. This

girl had hooked me, though. Maybe she had been momentarily enthralled by me, my passion for life, a bohemian life very different from her own, and maybe she had wanted only to leave the comfort of her true life for a quick glimpse at mine. But she had done something to me, reached into me and pulled out my heart like some Aztec sacrifice. Girls had the tendency to rip my heart out then. I felt miserable.

When the Golden Gate transit whooshed by on its way to Marin County, I ran to catch up with it. I boarded and slipped four dollars of tip money into the admission machine. I took this transport and stepped off before reaching the illuminated orange support towers of the Golden Gate Bridge where the red lights slowly flashed their signals to passing airplanes in the night.

I'd heard so much about this bridge and how hundreds had done it before. Hadn't the fellow who started Victoria's Secret leapt from this bridge? The driving electronic beat of Paul Oakenfold thrummed in my headphones, the deep repetitive bass of the music pushing me further toward this inclination. I knew the security cameras were on me, but I knew the second I leapt up onto the gate to climb over, a voice would come blaring across the public address system to tell me to stop. That or the nearby emergency phone would start to ring. So I gripped my fingers into the chain link fence and watched the reflection of the bridge light onto the bay below.

It was nice to watch with the music rising and falling inside the steady drum of my headphones. I thought of my grandfather and how when he was the same age as me he had lost most of his hearing in the war from the repeated machinegun fire from within the ball turret of a B-17 Flying Fortress. I thought how my grandpa had burly headphones on just as I did only he used them to block out the sound and communicate



with his shipmates to survive. And now here I was, his grandson, trying to trap the sound in, trying to keep the sound close to me so I would have the music when I killed myself. Even at twenty four, my ears had starting ringing and my hearing had started to fade from the constant high volume of the music. But then my grandpa had survived the war, hadn't he? And here I was, his ingrate of a grandson about to ruin myself, all of the work my parents had gone through to raise me while I waddled around in diapers, walking to high school on those cold mornings, living in my parent's basement all through college, and here I was going to waste all that they had done for me and all that I had done for myself. The music made me cry and I knew that I shouldn't jump, that I had come so far and that I would miss my mother and father and brother and sister and there were always other girls, there would always be other opportunities. I removed my fingers from the fence and thought how silly it was. I wondered how cold it would have been to hit the water, what bones would break first, how my guts would get scrambled, even if I dove in straight as possible. I remembered hearing how the undertow sucked people out into the ocean. And even if the impact didn't kill them, there were always the sharks. I thought of the name Golden Gate and its relation to St. Peter guarding the golden gates of heaven and I remembered a black-and-white cartoon I'd seen. There's a book editor standing before St. Peter and Pete says to him with regret: *Thank you for your submission. Alas, we don't think your life suits our needs and/or interests. Best of luck finding another heaven to live in for an eternity.* The thought of my own demise ebbed. I wouldn't go yet. I hadn't even published. How would I be remembered if I hadn't even published one word yet?

I walked to the Muni bus top heading back into the city and wondered why I was always so melodramatic. I forgot the busses didn't come but every half hour over there, so I caught a taxi in the Presidio where the minty smell of eucalyptus trees filled my brain and I rode in the darkness in the backseat with my headphones to the apartment in the Richmond district. It was one thirty in the morning when I arrived home.

My roommates were asleep. I came upon the small rosary I had hanging in my bedroom, pulled it off the wall, and dropped to my knees clutching it at the foot of the bed. I felt ashamed at the thought of throwing myself over the bridge into the bay. Why couldn't I channel some of that energy into something creative? What had she said about the brooch she had lost? It was in the shape of a bee? How bizarre. Why did I care about that? It must have been her devotion to her grandmother? I was moved by that devotion. But also how annoying. If it weren't for that brooch, we might have escaped to a café. Why were girls like that? Wild and unpredictable and angry at men for doing them wrong. And why did we go back to them time and time again when they were like that? Was it the genetics? Blind, dumb instinct that told men they had to deal with that kind of behavior in order to find a mate?

That night before I went to sleep I began to write a story about this meeting with the girl who I thought was *the one*. I ended up on the bee. The brooch that was a bee. And I couldn't write anymore after that.

I left the story alone and continued my life waiting tables at the diner during the day and at night I would escape to the café to write in my journal, listen to music in my headphones, while I tried to develop this d.j. story that was going nowhere. But the story with the girl and the brooch would not move forward either. There was something about

the bug that stifled me. She, this girl, became the bee and whenever I thought of her the insect appeared. It was so weird. I remember sending a postcard of the Golden Gate Bridge back home to my family, I wrote that I wish they were there, but the truth was I was glad they weren't. So they wouldn't see me like that.

I needed to express myself in another way. What else could I do? There was the work at the restaurant, but what to do after that and after the punching bag workouts, after the reading and the long moments in the cafés staring at the blank pages alone with my thoughts? I knew that I loved my headphones and that I was in need of music. What I listened to most was electronic music. I had my laptop and a pirated computer program my brother sent me in the mail. A program that allowed me to create my own music. My own beats. I had been inspired ever since I first stepped into a club. With the sound systems and the people dancing and moving, it was paradise. It was like the music was my sacred text, speaking my feelings. The music understood the pain I felt in those days. The loneliness. And I wanted to create something meaningful like that. A story that said what that music said. I wanted more than anything to understand the sad feeling laced into that music that had kept me alive. Why we choose to continue, even when everything sucks. And I knew it all stemmed from my longing for a girl. A good girl who wouldn't criticize me. A girl that loved me as I was. I missed the girl who led me west. The same girl who had abandoned me. But it was a mixture of hatred and love because if it weren't for her I might never have seen what it was like out there and I might have remained in the one horse town in which I grew up. Even though she had left me alone to the elements, I wanted to forgive her and go back to her. The longing for her was crazy. Intoxicating as it was, my nerves were shot. I wanted someone, but was

afraid of them now, like a lab rat shocked too many times. I knew better, was more wary of the so-called fairer sex. I thought I was gay for a second, but then thought of a naked man, with all the hair and the sweat and the smell, and the knowledge of male habits, it terrified me. I was simply meant to be alone for a while, to explore my interests, and not to sell my soul so soon. I had suffered enough. I wanted love. I wanted escape. I sought shelter from the continuous onslaught of synapse firings that brought me to the past. I wanted to move forward.

Then there was a phone call from a girl I had dated for a bit. The first girl after *the one* that the guys at work told me to go for. They told me in Spanish that I needed to *sacar un clavo con otro clavo*, that is take out one nail with another nail, and so the first girl that came around I went out with a couple of times to get my mind off the other one. But she was a mean one, too. Fortunately I had the confidence to tell her I no longer wanted to date her. I knew she liked me, which was nice, but she had done a fatal thing on one of our first dates.

“The way you chew your gum makes you look so cheap,” she had said.

It was enough for me to leave her then and there. A sudden sock in the jaw, at a stage in a relationship when all two lovers should do is find ways to make each other feel good. I had no energy to fight and I was nearly reduced to tears. But I thought we had ended it, and now here she was calling me, and it had been some time since I had felt the touch of someone.

She picked me up and we went to Bay Meadows to see the horse races and afterward she brought me to her apartment in Santa Clara. In no time we were removing each other's clothes and touching each other like before, but unlike before, I think she

was aware that she could lose me again. I knew she was at a disadvantage. Of course there was the added benefit of the booze we drank. She had made some fruity cocktails in her blender, followed by shots of tequila. Now we were making love on the carpet. And then I remembered my favorite part of sex with her was the way she shouted *ohmigod, ohmigod, ohmigod*, with her face contorted into that blessed expression of joy. When we were done, I rested on top of her for a while. It was cool she didn't mind this. And before we fell asleep, I had thoughts as to why I was no longer interested in her. It was three in the morning and we were drunk. I collapsed into the soft white sheets with my face to one side and my arms underneath the cool pillow, thinking that I had left her the first time for good reason. I passed on to slumber remembering what one of my roommates, the Wells Fargo bank roommate who just plowed through women, had told me once.

“Use them before they use you,” he had said.

In my dream that night there was the tree again. A solitary tree in an open field with the wind blowing back and forth. This time the tree had full foliage and the sun behind it cast shadows through the branches and the slight breeze moved the leaves to a vibrant shimmer. Now I moved towards it. When I moved closer, I noticed a bleached white sphere at the base of the trunk. I moved towards this thing and was distracted by a buzzing hum. I was close enough now to look up and see a moving mass of bees spewing from an opening in the trunk. They whizzed by. I ducked a little to see the white sphere nestled into a nook at the base of the tree. It was a human skull. There were the cavernous holes for eyes, the triangular absence of space for the nose, the teeth and jaw exposed into that toothy grin. With the bees ripping by above and this skull below

and this big oak tree over all of it, I had a sense of what it might have been like had I actually leapt off the Golden Gate Bridge.

I woke, prying my eyes open to this world and the life in which I lived. I was relieved to find myself in the bedroom of this other girl, not the one at the opera house, not the one I came to live with in San Francisco, but the one who had said I looked cheap when I chewed gum. Even though she said that, I knew she still wanted me and a feeling of joy crashed against me. I turned to see she had fallen asleep with her back turned, her body raising and falling with soft breath. She looked cold. And I remember pulling the sheet over her shoulder and falling back to sleep with my arm wrapped around her waist.