Until I met her for the first time, I could have never imagined that someone like me could ever fall so deeply for someone like that. Safe to say she was everything that I am not, a self-proclaimed punk who bounced around from guy to guy until eventually they grew tired of her, or ran out of money. At the time, though, I didn't know any of that, I just knew the beautiful girl who I found in a strip mall parking lot pulling herself out of a beat-up and not so crystal white, Mazda Miata. She had these curls that must have been freshly done because the way they moved freely in the wind would've made all the fashion models in Paris jealous. She had dyed it a platinum blonde hoping to match the color of car but instead settling somewhere around the color snow gets after a couple days on the ground. A cigarette began to reveal itself, expertly perched between those two beautiful lips and leading a beckoning smoke signal for me to follow. More important than anything, however, was she looked like she had just finished doing important things, and that more important things were only minutes ahead. For now, she simply walked from storefront-to-storefront attempting to buy anything she believed would keep her party going. It was somewhere among this almost catacomb of storefronts, and faded awnings, though, that her smoke just stopped pouring through, and just like that, the moment was over. There was nothing that I could do. Now it would be easy to say that after all this I just went about my day, but something about the situation wouldn't leave my mind alone.

It wasn't until three days later, at an all-night music festival I had been attending, I would get the chance to see her again. This time, however, she looked nothing like the woman whom I had watched climb out of that nearly twenty-year-old automotive safety hazard just a few days ago. No, this time she had an aura of freedom and liberation that someone can only get when their whole body weight is being supported by 15 drunk strangers in the climax of a crowd surf. It didn't take too long before she was back on the ground though, fixing the ever-present

tangles that lingered in her instantly recognizable blonde hair. Finally, after two or three stiff drinks I was able to muster enough courage to allow a couple words to slip out. “Hi, I’m Alex,” the words trickling out of my mouth like garden hose getting its last few drops out after being turned off. I’ll admit, I had no business talking to someone like her, and from the beginning of the conversation, I think we both knew it. She looked like the type of person who in high school would have spent her time setting petty fires and detaching mailboxes from their posts. Meanwhile, my high school experience equated to watching movies alone on Friday nights and lurking on social media to see all the cool parties everyone else was at. “Valarie,” she said back to me matter-of-factly, as though she had spent an entire lifetime around this sort of conversational immaturity, and it no longer bothered her.

Over the next two hours we talked about everything two increasingly inebriated people have to talk about. She would tell me about her stories from college, and I’d retort with a story about how one time my friends and I waited until midnight to be the first ones to see the *Star Wars* sequels. We’d be talking about classic grunge and then, in a matter of minutes, I’d interject with a story about the jazz festival I had just come back from. It was apparent even from the beginning that we lived two extremely different lives, but something about my rhetoric seemed to be working on her. Not only did she seem interested in me, but it seemed like as long as I kept buying her drinks, I could do no wrong. She finally agreed to come home with me later that night, and after an excruciatingly long ride home, that beat Miata was taking up the extra space in my driveway. It’s gorgeous owner, the extra space in my bed.

The next morning, though, when I reached my arm across the bed to be treated to the soft touch of her skin, she was nowhere to be found. I opened my eyes slowly, rubbing away all the crust that had accumulated throughout the night prior, and found exactly what my senses had

already told me. Valarie was nowhere to be found; most likely having slipped out in the middle of the night to prevent the dreaded walk of shame so many find themselves afflicted with come Sunday morning. Even knowing in my gut that she was nowhere to be found I still couldn't prevent myself from walking around the house in hopes that maybe she had just left to go pick up breakfast and was secretly coming right back to surprise me. As the minutes turned into hours though, and then the hours started ticking by, I was forced to confront the unfortunate reality of what had actually happened here. It wasn't until I gave up and plopped myself down onto the couch that I finally noticed it. In her quest to leave before I woke up this morning, she had left her shit scattered all over my place. It started with her makeup, strewn about all across my coffee table, but as I started looking I kept finding more and more. There were clothes just sitting in front of the mirror, undisturbed from the night before, and a note on the nightstand that simply read "I couldn't stay, sorry. You know where to find me for round two. -Val." While I didn't know what she meant at the time, it didn't take long until I did.

The rest of the day played out fairly normally, aside from this one feeling I just couldn't shake. I don't know if it was the note or the fact that her shit was now cluttering up every corner of my house, but I needed to see her again, if only to give the makeup and clothes back. Even though I didn't know exactly where she would be like the note had suggested, I had a good idea of where to start looking. In just one night together I had already learned of Valarie's presence in the party scene, having in one weekend alone been to thirteen different parties up and down the strip until eventually crashing on someone's couch for three days straight. She also told me she hadn't spent a weekend alone in the past three years. So clearly, if I wanted to find her, I just had to pick one and wait until she eventually showed up. The only difficulty was in picking which one she was going to be at. There was a party the hippies were throwing across town tonight, but

I doubt she'd show up there. Something about their vibes just didn't seem to match. She had no problem starting fights, but she certainly knew better than to go to a party looking for one. It was the best lead I had, though, so I threw on something I knew would get me into the party and walked out the door with one goal. I was going to find this woman.

Say what you will about the hippies, but they know how to throw a good party. This place was packed, and it looked like even those not dancing in the center of the room were just taking a break until the next song came on, sure to ignite the energy of the crowd again. A quick scan of the room would've told you that everyone I went to high school with was there. In fact, it would seem the only person not there was Valarie. This tiny detail, however, did not dissuade me from asking everyone at the party if they knew who she was. About half of them had never even heard of her, and the ones who had said that she was bad news, someone to stay away from at all costs. Eventually, I did reach one person who seemed to know exactly where somebody like me could find her. He told me that there was this party in the business district that she would have to be at. Some place where all the Wall Street types went after work to lay off some steam and have a couple of drinks. Having heard all I needed to hear, I pulled up the directions to the place on my phone and raced off down the street hoping to recreate the night before.

This didn't take long, as the moment my tires hit that parking lot, I saw her car. With its same shade of white which had been adorning my driveway the night before. I raced inside asking repeatedly to the bartenders where I could find her. They pointed me to a table in the back, but still she was nowhere to be seen. I sat down hoping that eventually if I just relaxed she would appear out of thin air like she seemed to have the night before. Which is why about fifteen minutes later when I saw her stroll out of the bathroom with two tall CEO types, I can't say that I was surprised in the lease. Finally though, there I thought she was, and just like the night before

something looked a little different about her. Maybe she had used her day to get her hair cut or a spray tan, but you could tell that the minor details of her had been altered. I politely asked the other two gentlemen walking to the table with her if we could have a moment alone. After a second, and a subtle reassurance from Valarie that she would be back soon, both walked over to the bar to what I can only assume was buy her another round for when they got back.

She lit a cigarette as I sat down, taking a long inhale from it before eventually asking why I had gone through so much effort to try and find her. I told her that she had left all her stuff at my house and asked if she wanted to come by to grab it tonight. This caused her to roll her eyes at me, clearly frustrated with the fact that I hadn't just brought her things to the bar with me tonight. "How about you just get me a drink?" She said desperately trying to keep the good vibes of the party going. I did exactly as she suggested and came back with two glasses of clear liquor. This it seemed to finally put a smile on her back on her face, and opened her heart back up to me. As the night went on, and I paid for more drinks, the mood of our conversation seemed to keep growing, surpassing even the level it had the night before.

Eventually, frustrated with the amount of time that I had been spending with their supposed date, the two men Valarie made her way here with tonight finally came back to our table, obviously eager to continue the night that they had planned with her. Before they could sit down, though, they were already demanding that it was time to go, and that Valerie should go with them. I'm not sure if it stemmed more from the intoxication or the fear of losing this woman I had worked so hard to find again, but just as she was gathering her things to leave I got up and punched one of the men square across the jaw. Chaos erupted throughout the establishment, as it typically does when a fight breaks out. This, however, seemed to be enough distraction for Valerie, as she quickly maneuvered over grabbing my arm, and running the two of us outside

before we could get into any more trouble. As soon as we got out the doors we were laughing, and she gave me a glance that seemed to suggest this entire thing had been some kind of joke to her. After a couple of seconds of breathing and trying to wrap our minds around what exactly had just happened, she gave me the six words I had been dying to hear all night. “Be at your place in fifteen.”

I wish I could tell you what ended up happening that night, I really do, but the truth is the only thing I remember is waking up the next morning only to find the same empty spot in my bed. This is how it went on for weeks. Every night that I could get her back to my place, she would be gone in the morning. Always being sure to leave something as a reminder of her presence. As time went on though, she became more erratic with where she would leave things. It wasn’t just makeup on the coffee table anymore, it was hair clips on my bathroom counters or headphones in my kitchen. Still every morning when I would find her mementos I’d become furious that once again that I’d one again been abandoned after our night together. There was always something about her I couldn’t shake. As I saw her more, I had to keep seeing her just for it to be enough. It didn’t matter to me that I knew in the morning she would be gone, because I knew by the end of the night I’d be scouring every party in town trying to find her. Each time having to buy her several rounds before she would even give me the time of day. Money was all she seemed to care about.

One night, though, against my better judgment I asked her to move in with me. I mean she already spent enough time at my house; enough of her stuff was already there, so it just made sense. It also helped that at the time I had bought more drinks for her than I had ever seen her consume in one setting. Figuring that she was in as generous a mood as I was ever going to see, I pulled the trigger. To my surprise she agreed, and not soon after we started the process of

moving in together. There were still some strange peculiarities about our relationship, though. Her living in the house didn't change the fact that I never saw her first thing in the morning. It was only after I called her that she would almost magically appear back at the house with coffee or McDonald's at the ready to subside any worries that I might have been accumulating. After work, she always seemed to be there the second I walked through the door, ready to begin a night filled with bright neon lights and enough liquor to kill a small horse.

All and all, it was good, until it wasn't. I mean now I wasn't just buying her drinks anymore, I was paying for her gas, her clothes, her food, each of those expenses falling back on me. Thinking about it now I'm not sure I ever saw her pay for anything. Not to mention I was still paying for her to get into these parties she wanted to go to every night. Some nights they were at warehouses near the water, others we were at project houses miles away from the city. Even still, I was growing more reliant on her by the day, like if I didn't have her with me my only option was to shut down and wait till she came back. No matter the party it was like the only way I could make conversation with these people was if I had her with me.

We made this little arrangement work for about six months, but it was not without its fair share of incidents. There was one time she ran out on me for three days, with no call, no note, and no mementos. I must have torn the entire house upside down looking for any trace of her. I called everyone I knew from the parties to see if they knew where she was, but nobody could find her. Then just a few days later she walked back in through the front door like nothing had ever happened, a big hug, and McDonald's at the ready. I wasn't even mad, just relieved that at least for the moment I had her back. Another time she threatened to move out if I couldn't come up with the cash to cover this party that she wanted to go to. I ended up having to run down to the pawn shop and sell my watch just to get enough money.

What Valarie wanted she got, and as soon as you were out she'd just move on to the next guy. I remember once at a party these two finance bros kept telling me that they had messed around with her a couple of years ago, and she ended up taking them for twenty-two thousand dollars before one of them had to go to rehab for all the partying. I was worried that I saw myself nearing the same point, but right now all that mattered was for as long as I was with her I was invincible. I mean she couldn't really get that much money out of me, could she?

Every night we were playing the same games. I would get home angry and frustrated until I saw her, then once I did the first words out of her mouth would always be "There's this party on the corner of blah and blah, can we please go, please!" I'd ask her if we could just stay in tonight, which always upset her and five minutes later I would be trying to sell something else to come up with the money. Then one night it finally happened, I took a seat in the middle of my empty living room and realized I had nothing left to possibly sell off for her. I checked the bedroom looking for any spare cash I might have stashed away before I met her, but there was nothing. Reluctantly, I told her, hoping that for one night we could just stay in and be in love with each other. She didn't want to hear it, though, and quickly she packed up the little she had and drove off, likely in search of the next sucker to fall in love with her. That was the last time I ever saw her, and unlike in our early days, she made sure to leave no trace of herself in the house. There was not so much as a sock that she happened to forget.

Eventually, my friends started to come back around and check on me, curious about how exactly I had gotten to this point. I told them the whole story, how I had met a girl who took me for everything I had until eventually I had nothing. I told them about all the partying and the drinking and the nights I couldn't remember. This seemed to have quite an effect on them and a few days later they told me they had all pooled their money together to get me treatment in a nice

facility out in Oregon. That's where I'm writing this from now. All the therapists and doctors tell me that the only way to move past this is by writing, but it's all still kind of new to me. I'm worried that I don't really know how. They said that writing out my story would be a good start, though. I'm not sure how much longer they're going to keep me out here or what I could possibly do when I get back. Even with all that being said, I'd still give up everything for one more second with her. They say that's why I can't leave yet, so I guess we'll just have to try again tomorrow morning.