Black and White

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Abstract
In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"The air is saturated with the kind of cold that makes you wonder if global warming is just a myth. The bitter wind makes me wish for Satan's scorn to rise from Hades to blister my skin. It's winter in Chicago, and I'm wearing a hooded sweatshirt. If she could, my mother would return from the grave just to come back to tell me to put some warm clothes on. A hat maybe. Perhaps some gloves. The hood of my sweatshirt is thrown around by the wind, which is irritating my eyes. I can't tell if my contacts are drying out or if they are frozen. It's that cold."

Cover Page Footnote

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PHIL LORIGO

BLACK AND WHITE

The air is saturated with the kind of cold that makes you wonder if global warming is just a myth. The bitter wind makes me wish for Satan's scorn to rise from Hades to blister my skin. It's winter in Chicago, and I am wearing a hooded sweatshirt. If she could, my mother would return from the grave just to come back to tell me to put some warm clothes on. A hat maybe. Perhaps some gloves. The hood of my sweatshirt is thrown around by the wind, which is irritating my eyes. I can't tell if my contacts are drying out or if they are frozen. It's that cold.

I always walk to Mick's, a bar owned by a buddy of mine. He keeps me in free drinks, and I keep him company on those lonely tavern Monday nights. Terry owns the bar, but he named it Mick's. He thought it sounded tougher than a bar named "Terry's." I agreed. Mick's is three blocks from my apartment. I don't own a car, and don't like pissing money away on taxis, so I walk there every Monday night. Past the record shop. Past the butcher. Past the homeless guys. Sometimes I give them a dollar if I wanted to feel better about myself. Most times, I don't.

Reaching my destination, I smile as the blast of warm air engulfs me when I open the door. After a few blinks to thaw my eyes, I survey the situation. Three townies playing pool, one slutty barfly, two kids who are definitely underage (but I'm not telling Terry). And the old man with the walker. The old man with the walker is in my seat, but I'm not going to ask him to move. I grab the stool next to him and wait for Terry.

"Old Man." I don't even know his name.
"Young man." His raspy voice can barely be heard over the jukebox.
"I got that picture I was telling you about last week. This one's of my grandfather in World War II." I reach into the front pocket of my sweatshirt and pull out a picture folded in half. I slide it in front of him as if it's some business transaction. He reaches for it with the speed of a tortoise and takes his time to unfold it. After thirty seconds of silent staring, he folds it in half and jams it into his coat pocket.
"Didn't know him. Your grandfather. Didn't know him. Looks like a handsome man. He died in the war, didn't he?" He stares at the bar directly in front of him when talking to me.
"Yeah, he died. In the war. Took one in the face early on." I reach into my pants pocket to pull out my cigarettes.
"That's how it happens. He was a good-looking man. Not as good-looking as I was, but close. War takes away everything good about you. It stole his good looks, as well as his life. For me, it took my right eye and my right knee." He pulls out a Zippo lighter and slides it over in the same manner as I gave him the picture. His eyes remain focused on the same spot of the bar. Even his glass eye is staring down.
"Where's Terry?" I ask the old man.
"Went to go change the keg a few minutes ago." The old man puts out his hand. I place a cigarette in it. He breaks the filter off and puts the remainder in his mouth. I light mine, then his, and return his lighter to the bar in front of him. Leaning forward, I fumble in my back pocket for another picture. This one is folded in quarters. I remove it, unfold it, and place it on the bar between us. Without turning his head or moving his eyes, the old man drags the picture directly in front of him on the bar. I figure he's going to stare at it for a few seconds, so I go behind the bar. I don't know where the hell Terry is. I reach into the cooler and pull out a bottle of beer. Coors. Fine, whatever. I twist off the cap and return to my seat.

The picture is already back in front of where I was sitting. It catches me off guard how beautiful the picture is. Gazing at it, into her eyes, I'm taken back to when I took that picture. Back in 1987. My recollection is interrupted by the old man. "You were in love with her, right?" It doesn't even sound like a question coming out of his mouth. More like a statement.

"Almost." It doesn't sound like a statement coming out of my mouth. More like a question. "I knew her for one night. After that..." I take a drag of my cigarette and exhale deeply.

"She looks like a keeper." The smoke trickles from his mouth. He looks at me for the first time this evening. "So why did you let her go?"

I put my cigarette out and light another.

"I have always loved pictures. Black and white pictures. I remember when my grandmother showed me that picture of my grandfather when I was seven years old. Something about the absence of color made it authentic. From then on I was fascinated by photography. I had taken pictures in my teens. In high school I took photography, but that's not where I did my learning. I read. Books. I read until I knew what I was doing. Lotte Jacobi. Alfred Stieglitz. These names mean something to me. Not the bullshit my teacher was spewing. I finished high school and decided to go to New York City instead of college. I set up camp there and lived like a photographer."

The old man nods.

"So do you want to hear the short version or the long one?" I extend a cigarette to the old man.

"Long." His voice is full of gravel. After giving him the cigarette, he breaks the filter off of this one, too.

He motions for me to continue.

"I was at a party in 1990. New York City." When telling the old man about the picture, I'm surprised how much I remember.

High on whatever pills I just ate, I slump down on Damien's couch. Damien wasn't his real name, but the couch wasn't real leather, either. He used to throw these parties; a mixture of intellectuals with connections and kids like myself. Detached from the party, I just stare at the people like some stare at a television. Maybe it's the pills, or maybe I'm just that disciplined, but everything shifts into black and white. Every time I blink, it's the shutter on my camera blinking.

Ronnie shouting at Damien.
Click.

Sarah stumbling onto someone important looking.
Click.

The door beginning to open.
Click.

And a beautiful creature walking in.
Click.

When you're on this many pills, everything is familiar. It's like déjà vu. You always know what's going to happen next, but you can never act on that knowledge. Everyone looks familiar, especially strangers. Everyone's your best friend. And if a gorgeous girl walks into the apartment, her beauty and welcoming glance are magnified millions of times. I follow her with my eyes as she walks up to Damien. They exchange a quick kiss, and he points to the table with the booze on it. She walks over and begins to pour a drink. I don't realize it yet, but I'm already standing somehow. I swagger over mixing stumbles with all the cool I can muster. Weaving in between the familiar strangers, I park myself inches behind her. As she sets down the bottle of vodka, her elbow brushes against my stomach. She whips around and stares at me, mildly startled. I open my mouth but no words come out.

"Ariel. I'm Ariel." Her words sound like a symphony. Sure, I knew it was partially because of the pills, but the pills couldn't completely make up how great this girl was.

"Hi." I wanted to say more, but that's all I could get out.

"I take pictures. I take really good pictures." My speech wasn't slurred, but my mind was a collage of irrelevant thoughts.

"Show me." She was so confident. I lazily motioned behind her with my weak arm and swagger off into Damien's back room without looking back. Stepping onto the shag carpet, I knelt down and removed the top of a cardboard box.

"So how do you know Damien?" She asks, taking a sip of her drink. I was the one startled this time.

"You know. I just know him." I was barely paying attention as I flipped through my work. I kept a box of pictures at Damien's because of these parties. Sometimes real important people would show up, and I didn't want to miss any opportunities to get my work noticed. I stood up a little too fast and shoved an 8 x 10 into her chest.

"Look." I stared at her as she stared at my picture. It was a picture of a stripped car. The wheels were gone. Various parts were removed and the mechanical underbelly was showing. And it was in black and white.
"God, this is amazing." Approval from this girl was the equivalent of approval from God.

"What else have you done?" She closed the door to the back room and took a seat on the floor. I slowly lowered myself and grabbed the top half of the stack of photos in the box. I sat down, almost leaning on her, and began to show her my work. I explained why I took each picture. I told her that my uncle worked in a factory, and that's how I got in to take those pictures. I showed her the one of the dead cat and gave the story behind it. I showed her the one taken at my mother's funeral, but remained silent. She gently removed the stack of photos from my hand and kissed my lips. A smile slowly crept across my face. She got up and went over to the door. She locked it and turned the lights off.

We made love. We didn't fuck. We didn't have sex. We weren't two people doing it in the back room at a party. We. Made. Love. I don't know how it happened. We weren't fumbling in the darkness. We weren't consumed by lust. Somehow, this stranger and I just came together. I still can't explain it. But it happened.

We fell asleep afterwards. Well, at least I did. I awoke to the sunlight beaming through the hazy window and shining directly into my eyes. I slowly turned my head to look at her. She was just as beautiful now that I was sober. I was still a little out of it from whatever I took the night before. I removed her arm from my chest and sat up. She opened her eyes and let out a cute little growl.

"Morning." The sun on her face illuminated her smile.

"Morning." I whisper as I kiss her forehead.

"I want to see the rest of your work. It's fucking amazing. Get it all ready, and I'm going get cleaned up and grab us some coffee." She put her dress back on and aimed for the door. I put my boxers back on and inched over to the box of my photos.

"Last night," she said. "Last night was amazing." She exits the room with a smile that makes me wish she wasn't leaving.

I grabbed the bottom half, the half we didn't look through, and started taking out the best ones. The picture of the bird's nest outside my apartment. The photo of my empty refrigerator. The one of the condemned house. I grabbed about ten pictures by the time she returned.

"Show me what you got." She pops back in the room quicker than I expect. Her enthusiasm this early in the morning makes me feel so important. She hands me a mug of black coffee and sits down next to me.

I explain the story behind the picture of the supermarket. I hand her the one of the dark clouds. I pick out the one of the dead tree.

"How do you do this? You have such an eye for what's, just, I dunno. The black and white makes it so, so..."

"Authentic." My statement causes a silence filled with understanding. She nods in awe and pointed to the box.

"More. Show me more."

The box was empty, but I still had a stack of photos on my lap.

"This series I took at a studio. One of my friends worked at a porno theatre. I found out where they filmed the movies, and took pictures of the actors and actresses. With their clothes on." I got two photos into the series and she grabs my hand.
"Show me something else." She sounds anxious.

"No, these are good. The way their faces look-"

"I want to see something else. More buildings." She grabs the stack of photos out of my hand.

"Why? What's wrong with these?" Frustrated with her, I try to grab the stack of photos out of her hand. She pulls away, and they spill onto the floor. We both look at the aftermath of our little skirmish, and she looks at me. She stares at me from the floor directly in front of me. Gazing. With those deep eyes. So dark. So powerful. She stares at me from the picture on the floor. In black and white.

"Don't." Her words sound desperate. "Don't say anything. Don't think anything. I know what you're thinking and I know what you're going to say." She grabs he edge of the picture and flips it upside down. "Don't think what you're thinking."

"I..." I don't know what I am thinking.

"I..." I don't know what I am saying.

"I...I..." I don't know what to do.

"I'm leaving." I grab the photos as quickly as I can. I pile them into the box and mash the top on. I pick it up and headed for the door.

"Don't..." She sounds weak. She sounds ashamed. She sounds defeated. I bite my lower lip so I won't say anything. I bite my lip and I just walk out the door.

The old man coughs, sharply taking me back to the present. I look down at my hand and see my cigarette has gone out minutes before. I drop it into the ashtray and look at the old man. He is still staring at me.

We both look at the picture and remain silent.

"You keep that one." He looks at me the way I always imagined my grandfather would look at me. "You keep that one and you learn from those memories."

I nod.

"You tell Terry I had to go. Tell him I had a good idea about some pictures." I put my cigarettes back in my pocket. I fold the picture of her back into fourths and carefully put it into my back pocket.

"Old man." I say as I stand up.

"Young man," he says, and slowly turns his head back to the bar.