

The Couch

A few weeks ago my best friends dropped me off at home after a night out to dinner with them. They had been married the fall before and were moving out of town the following week, so I'd been spending as much time with them as I could. Going from dinner to dinner, like the despondent son, suddenly realizing his time was limited.

During dinner a storm had swept in from the west. Meanwhile, we had sipped Martini's at Bar Abilene in uptown, with not a care in the world. We had heard the rain, beating on the rooftop above us, but we had not been afraid. The liquor had kept our stomachs warm and our resolve strong, our resolve to wait out the weather through apple and strawberry martinis.

By the time we headed out that night, numerous neighborhoods along our path home had blacked out during the storm, which itself had long since passed. It was odd, driving through the dark, to suddenly turn a corner into the blinding lights from every direction. You don't realize how much we light up our streets until you see them without those same lights.

I sat in the back seat, like a twelve-year old on his way to his favorite amusement park. I sat looking with glee at everything in the path between my point of departure and my final destination. Occasionally, I would catch my reflection in the window when the light played out right. I would see my eyes staring out in that reflection, eyes larger than saucers and full of wonder. I had a smile across my lips that led one to believe that I could never be sad.

As we approached my block that night, we noticed that the odd triangle I lived in was completely dark. Along the edge of the three streets that marked the perimeter of my home, the lights shone on. They pierced the darkness, but only barely. I can't imagine what it looked like from the sky, this isosceles triangle of black amidst all of that light.

I lived in the center of that triangle, back in the dark, and I would often wonder what I looked like to my friends as I stepped into that nether world. Out of the light and into my home. I turned at the edge of the light and held my hand up to them, and then I turned my back on them once again and let the darkness envelop me.

It took me almost the entire walk to my front steps before my eyes adapted to the dark. Almost the entire walk until my eyes adapted enough to see more than two feet in front of me. Suddenly I could see somewhere around three and a half, four feet, if lucky. I used the LCD on my cell phone for light in order to get my key into the lock, holding up the display with my left hand while turning the lock with my right.

My cat, having no difficulty with the dark whatsoever, immediately circled my feet as I entered my apartment. She began to cry louder than she had been for the last half block of my walk. I had used her distinct cry, not truly a meow and not truly a squeak, to help guide me towards my front steps. Now that I was home, I could do without the litany of meows' in regards to my absence for the evening. I was ready to be home. I was ready to relax.

I slowly moved through my apartment, still using the LCD on the cell phone to lead me, and found the couch in my living room. I had planned on finishing the night with a few comic books, which I left stacked on the floor in front of the couch. They were seated at the perfect angle to reach as I extended my arm down from my reclined position along the length of the couch. But seeing as I couldn't see the cat crying a few feet from me, I laid back and began to listen. Not only to her, I was listening to the world surrounding me.

You don't realize how silent the darkness is until you step into it. My cat sounded like a fire engine, braying out from various tables and cozies throughout my apartment. She felt it important that I understood her loneliness that evening, yet she was not quite ready to get her fifteen minutes of doting, the fifteen minutes I allotted her each evening.

Eventually she calmed down, as I started to hear the noises of my neighborhood around me. The man upstairs rolling over, having given up on anything productive that evening and turning in early (he was usually up until well past three in the morning). The woman downstairs, shaving her legs by candlelight while humming the tune to Shaft (she usually shaved in the morning, adorning my shower with her voice up through the drain in my tub). The young boys across the street, using the darkness for cover as they

smoked the one cigarette they'd managed to collect that day (cigarettes I often provided, after hearing their stories of neighborhood blight).

I could even hear the Somali men in my back alley that night, the men who smoked dope behind the dumpster every night. Sometimes, they were willing to share. Tonight they were discussing their daughters, who still remained in Somalia and for whom these men were here, working in a deli across the street in the hopes of bring them "home" someday.

Taki, a man who made the best gyro I'll ever eat in my life, was lamenting the recent death of his brother. Not for the loss, mind you, but for the money he had to send back home to help out with the funeral costs, and how much more time that meant before his daughter would hug him once again.

I lit a cigarette and listened to the snap of the match, the hiss of the flame. You don't notice how loud the crackle of the tobacco burning gets when it has to compete with everything else in the lighted world. The sound the ashes make when they fall into the ashtray, a noise you always assumed was silent. Even the sound the smoke makes as it curls up and out of the two holes of your nostrils. You can almost follow its path, snaking up and away from your lungs as it disperses into the air around you.

The cat was playing with her toy mouse in the front room again. I could hear the bell tinkling in her collar. She got that collar because she was getting too good at sneaking up on birds. My neighbors didn't like finding the rotting corpse of a cardinal on their porch on a Sunday afternoon. Since the bell, there were no more corpses, no more dead birds.

Lying on the couch that night, I stretched my arm down and fingered the edges of the top comic book, resting at the foot of the couch. It was Generation X #32. I knew this because I had finished issue #31 the night before, dragging for half an hour on the last three pages as my eyes had kept closing against my will. I had planned on reading through the first fifty issues a few days before that, needing my fix of Chris Bachalo but steadily getting tired of Scott Lobdell.

I had been sleeping on my couch for the last six months. I had been sleeping there ever since I had taken my cat in for

"Adoption". "Adoption" meant that he was fourteen years old and he'd stopped using his litter box and started using my floor. "Adoption" meant that the Humane Society doesn't "Adopt" fourteen-year old cats that shit on your carpet, piss on your clothes. "Adoption" meant that they have you sign a form, which you must legally receive a receipt for, only to tell you that they are going to take your cat in the back room and stick it with a needle that will put him to sleep forever.

I slept on the couch. I slept on the couch because I hadn't slept in my bed for six months. I hadn't slept in my bed because it was a bed we'd shared for the last thirteen years as co-owners. He and I, that cat. It was a bed that every night before I had woken up to a foot asleep because he was draped across it. A bed that I had woken up to with paws in my face, paws in face when the lightning was so loud that he was afraid. A bed that was never truly mine, but ours. No, his. A bed that the girls I had been with in years past always found difficult to claim, not because of me but because of my friend.

I hadn't felt like returning to it in the last six months because it seemed inappropriate. Sacrilegious, if you will. And so the couch had become my home. It was the couch I had spent the summer between my freshman and sophomore year sleeping on, the couch in my parents basement after my former bedroom had been co-opted into the "workout" room. The "workout" room consisted of a pack of smokes, a reclining chair, a television and some beers and was known as "where my step-father was when guests were over". "Working" out, as you will.

The couch seemed like an old home to me. I lit another smoke and listened to the tobacco burn, once again. I held the smoke in longer than usual and my eyes began to water, to burn, and I exhaled quickly, burning my throat slightly. I heard a car three blocks away drive through a puddle.

SSSWWWIIIISSSSH HHH, followed by the splat of the water on the cars parked along the streets. As I listened to the water drip from the car frames that night, dripping from the overhang outside my window, I wondered when the power would come back on.

And suddenly the cat in the front room began playing with her mouse again. She ran into the wall seven times. She

has a balance problem. She may have been able to see in the dark, but it didn't stop her from being just as clumsy as she was in the light. I listened for twenty-some minutes until she tired. I knew that soon, very soon, she would find a place for the night on my ankles, or perhaps on my stomach as she rarely did.

I had been told not to get another cat to soon. That she may acclimate herself to the solo life, and another cat would be more problematic than comfortable. I'd been waiting and watching, reading books by people who know way too much about cats in the hopes of figuring her out. Keeping her happy. I told myself I'd give it another two months, and then make a decision. I'd make a decision for her. But I knew I'd have trouble, trouble truly making that decision for her. After all, I had had to make a decision for him also, once before.

Taki was still lamenting over the loss of his brother for all the wrong reasons when they suddenly went silent, like they knew something was coming. I could barely hear them passing their pipe and I was surrounded by complete silence, I couldn't even track the dripping water from the rooftops any more, the water dripping off of car frames three blocks away.

BBBBBBMVPPPHHHHHHHHHH.

The power suddenly came back on. It made the noise that old TV's do when you turn them on. That noise that accompanies the rectangle of light that starts in the middle of the screen and slowly spreads into a picture over several minutes. I heard this noise and it was as if something clicked on inside of me. I'd been lying with my eyes wide open for over two hours, and suddenly things started making more sense.

I heard electrical equipment turning on all around me. The lights started to burn again on the street corners. The microwave clocks started back up with a beep and a whir. The light above my head clicked on, because I had turned the knob when walking into my living room as a natural reaction I could have done blind and hadn't even noticed I'd done with the power out. And then I heard the alarm clocks resetting in the apartments around me.

I sat there for seventeen minutes before getting up, turning the light off and walking into my bedroom. I knew this because my alarm clock said 12:17 when I sat down on the side of my bed that night. I had pushed the sheet and blanket back, a sheet and blanket I had set over six months before, and crawled into my bed.

I opened the LCD display on my cell phone for the last time that night and set my alarm clock to match it's time, 12:18. I set the alarm for 6am and laid my head back on pillows I'd missed for too long, letting the continually growing hum of the returning electricity lull me into sleep.

I would never sleep on my couch again after that night.

The End.