

BUZZED

By

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I was reading *Mrs. Dalloway* and Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself when I got the call. It was only two in the afternoon, but I was already through half a bottle of Pinot Noir and was ambitiously working towards finishing it. It was easier, somehow, to follow Woolf's stream-of-consciousness with a fuzzy mind. Blurred ideas flowed into blurred cognition and aligned. It was raining and I thought this was significant because thoughts streamed down my brain like the deluge that slashed against the window.

When the phone rang I put down my book. It was my mother. I got up from the couch and walked towards the door, a pack of cigarettes in hand. Something was wrong, I could tell. She usually didn't call me in the middle of the afternoon. I stepped outside and answered, speaking around my cigarette.

Did you know that Alex died last week, she said.

I did not know.

His mother posted on Facebook that everyone should be careful, extra-careful when taking prescription painkillers. It could kill you, my mother said.

I lit a cigarette and pulled in a deep drag, filling my lungs with smoke; hoping for clarity. Alex Busczynski, I asked.

Alex Busczynski, she said.

It had been years since I had thought of Alex. We had been childhood friends, mostly because our parents were friends. I stayed with him for a weekend one time. We watched Star Wars, all three of them. It was the first time I had ever seen the films. The violence, the romance, the adventure_was an adrenaline rush that my childhood body could not contain. We wrestled in his basement, using pillows as padded-clubs, smashing each other upside the head. I would scream, I am your father! That was my war cry. I liked the thought of being the bad guy. It wasn't until years later, when the new Star Wars movies came out, that I learned Darth Vader hadn't always been the bad guy.

We had picked grapes together in his mother's garden. Then we took some over to his neighbors, who were also family friends. They had three daughters. They were all beautiful; all budding breasts, periods-around-the-corner, and inevitable womanhood with inevitable passion to follow. At least, I thought they were all beautiful. I was jealous of Alex then, because I thought that Chelsie, the oldest, had a crush on him. She was the prettiest and the closest to my age. We played together for a couple of hours. When we ran out of games, I suggested we play boys chase the girls. This, as far as I was concerned, was a universal game.

Chelsie frowned; I don't know why boys always want to play that game. It's so immature.

Yeah, Alex said.

Alex and Chelsie watched from the sideline as I played with the younger girls. I've been playing that game ever since. I chased a second cousin who was the epitome of gorgeousness; a red-head. I chased a girl with freckles sprinkled across her face whose lips I desperately wanted

to taste. I chased a blue-eyed Mennonite girl who let me put my tongue in her mouth. I chased an Italian beauty with scarred wrists and shoulders who eventually became my betrothed.

Are you sure he's dead, I asked my mother. I sat down on the porch steps, not trusting my sense of balance due to a sudden wave of vertigo.

Yes.

I love you, I said. I hung up. I scratched out my cigarette and dropped it into a pop can. I walked back into the house, closed my book, and grabbed the bottle of Pinot Noir. I drank all that was left.

Why, I demanded. Why, God? You had no right to take him. It was an accident, why didn't you protect him? Why didn't you intervene? This is why I'm not sure you even exist, I screamed.

Silence.

I stumbled into my room and fell before I reached my bed. I crawled up into it and watched the ceiling spin. I would buy the flowers myself.

There was no funeral. There was a memorial service, which I was invited to by the *We Love Alex Busczynski* page on Facebook. I scrolled down the postings and read goodbyes. They all said we miss you, we love you, you were wonderful. I thought about posting but couldn't bring myself to, at least not on that page. Everyone else had a right to post on his wall. They had kept in contact and they had *known* him, the most recent Alex, who was a stranger to me. Instead, I posted something on my wall:

When the elderly pass away, we say that they lived a full life, they left behind a legacy, they live on through their children and grandchildren, they are at peace now, and, that acutely flippant phrase, it was their time. Last week a childhood friend of mine died. He was young. He loved football. He introduced me to Star Wars. He's dead. Years and years of life still spread out before him, ripe for the taking. He will never stand before the alter as his bride-to-be walks down the aisle. He will never know what it is to hold a newborn child that is of his own making. He will never x, he will never y, he will never z. His life was cut short and I am fiercely angry and indignant for him, for he cannot be sorry for himself. He is gone. I am here. Life is short. We will be reunited, in the end, but as for now, I will remember him for what I knew him to be.

His brother, his older brother, liked my post and asked me to post any pictures I might have. All the photographs of Alex and me, I knew, were with my parents, who lived out of state. But I could visualize them.

There is one of us in our pajamas with our hair sticking out at impossible angles. We have Nintendo controllers in our hands. Even though our faces are pointed towards the camera, our eyes are angled towards the TV. We are sitting on my bed. Crude marker depictions of Chewbacca and Han Solo decorate my wall behind us.

I drove up to Alex's memorial service alone. My fiancé had a migraine and simply couldn't go. I had told her everything I could remember about Alex that week. I think she was on Alex overload. She would listen, nodding, sometimes smiling. She was indulging me. There was no emotion in those brown-eyes. I wanted her, I needed her to understand. Alex was dead. He was gone. He wasn't coming back and I was alive. How come? I mixed medications and hard

liquor all the time. I should be dead, I said. But I was alive. I should really quit smoking, I told her. She agreed with that.

I told her that I understood about her migraine and that she should rest. I drove up the I-5, going well under the speed limit. Cars whizzed past me, driven by people who were going places. Perhaps to meet a loved one. Maybe to work. You know, places. It was sunny and I remember begrudging the sunshine. Didn't it know, I thought, didn't it know Alex was dead. The song, "I'm the man," played over the radio. The lyrics, "I'm the man, I'm the man, I'm the man...girl, you can tell everybody, I'm the man" rolled through my head.

When I pulled into the church parking lot, a cop car pulled in behind me and parked. I thought I was going to get a ticket. I hadn't had a drink since the night before, but my screaming headache indicated that I was definitely still hung over. I wondered if somehow my driving had been effected. I stayed put, hands choking the steering wheel. Two policemen exited the vehicle, along with a young man who looked vaguely familiar. They walked him up to the church, a police officer stationed on either side of the young man. They passed me and headed towards the church. At the time, I had no context for putting the pieces together.

I inched into the church, feeling very out of place. I hadn't been to church in a while and I was wearing my Christopher Hitchen's shirt under my button-up and tie because I couldn't find a clean undershirt. They all smelled like cigarettes.

Everyone was whispering. Soft voices echoed down from the vaulted ceiling and poured over me. The ricocheted words crawled over my skin, creating an itch I couldn't scratch. It was almost like everyone had a secret except for me. I felt my heart thud against my chest, punching

my ribcage like a speed-bag because I couldn't punch anything without making a scene. I wanted to hit something, until my knuckles broke or bled. There was no secret. Alex was dead.

I recognized an old friend of my father's, a tall, heavy-set man in a suit, and weaved my way through small groups of people. Before saying hello, I wrapped him in a hug and he hugged me back, hard.

How are you, he asked.

I'm okay.

It's too bad. It's really too bad.

I wanted to say shit happens, but managed a shrug and, accidents happen.

We chit-chatted for a while. He asked me about my family. I said they were sorry they couldn't make it. I asked him about his daughter, Natalie. When Natalie and I were little, we had pretended to get married once. Savannah, my younger sister, was our daughter, who, scandal-of-scandals, was born out of wedlock and attended our service. My mother played the wedding march on her baby grand while I escorted Natalie down the hall. Savannah was in tow, clapping her hands.

Natalie was in college, he said, doing well. He told me he had to get ready to officiate the service. I let him go, reluctantly. And, just like that, I was alone again. I wandered over to the tables lined with photographic evidence of Alex's life. I flipped through albums and traced his face with my finger. Suddenly, I needed proof that Alex and I had coexisted. I raced through every photo album; desperate. I wasn't in any pictures.

I found more old family friends and asked to be their adopted son for the service. They said yes.

Before the lights dimmed in the sanctuary, I looked over and saw a young woman that looked remarkably like Chelsie. It had to be Chelsie because she was sitting next to a man that looked remarkably like Chelsie's father. She was still beautiful. Her arms were crossed and she slunk low into her seat. She wasn't crying, but nobody was crying. I wished people would. I could feel the weight of those unshed tears and it was stifling.

The lights dimmed and Alex's fiancé ascended the stage. She looked like she was about to go out. She wore a dress that just stopped over her butt with stilettos. Her steps were deliberate, maybe brave even. I wonder now if she knew then. I suspect she did. Her delivery, in retrospect, was almost stoic, almost defensive.

She did not cry. She said Buzz, Alex's nickname, was a great guy. He was a volunteer firefighter. He was going to school to be a paramedic. He would help people move for free. He was kind. He was caring. He was the usual things that fiancés tend to be. She said she wouldn't tell the story of how she and Alex met, because it should be told over a beer and that was the only way she would tell it.

Alex's younger brother, Brian, got up to speak.

One night, years before, when I was staying with Alex and his family, Brian couldn't sleep. That day, he had called me into the bathroom, grinning ear-to-ear. He convinced me to look in the toilet and I saw poop. He laughed hard. I had forgiven him by that night. We stayed up into the early hours of the morning. I told him Bible stories. I told him every Bible story I knew, which was a lot, because I was a pastor's kid. He fell asleep right after Jonah was spit out

of the whale, right before he descended into Nineveh to preach about fire and brimstone; otherwise known as repentance.

Brian had a large notebook that he read from. He stuttered through his goodbye. We were all patient.

Chelsie's father got up to speak. He said some stuff about heaven, about how we would all see Alex again, someday.

After the service, I hugged Alex's mother and made a bee-line for my car. I noticed Chelsie's father walking towards his car. I ran after him.

As a disclaimer, I don't usually kiss men nor am I kissed by men.

The first and last time I kissed a man it was on the cheek. It was a dare, in class. We were old childhood friends and for shock value, I pecked him briefly. We laughed at the reaction, like the stupid adrenaline junkies we were, blood rushing to our faces. He got a girl pregnant that week and immediately left the state. I haven't seen him since.

The first man who kissed me who wasn't my father was a great uncle. He was Greek. My family and I were at a party. He took my face in his hands and he kissed both my cheeks. I blushed but said nothing. This was the custom.

The second man who kissed me was Chelsie's father. I ran up to him in the parking lot and said, thank you for what you said. It meant a lot. He didn't recognize me. Time ages us all. I told him my name and he smiled.

He shook my hand and said give this to your father. Then he kissed me on the cheek, and, give that to your mother. He turned and walked away.

I did not blush. I stood in the middle of the parking lot, dressed in a shirt, tie, and my new shoes. Suddenly, everything felt frail, like life would shatter at the slightest touch. I cried the whole drive home. I wasn't ready to die. I wasn't ready to go. I wasn't ready to join Alex.

Two days after Alex's memorial service, my mother called me. I grabbed a pack of cigarettes and headed outside.

Your father sent you something on Facebook I think you need to see.

Okay, I said. I lit my cigarette and pulled in a long drag.

Was Brian at the funeral?

Yes. Why wouldn't he be?

They let him out of prison then.

What? I coughed a little. Not out of surprise; my lungs just ached.

Brian drank and drove and killed a pedestrian last year.

Oh, I said. I didn't know. There were two policemen who escorted someone out of a cruiser who I thought looked familiar.

Look on Facebook, she said and hung up.

My father sent me a link to an article entitled *Would-be Firefighter Dies from Heroin*. I clicked on the link and Alex's picture popped up. I read the article, grinding my teeth. Alex had shot-up, overdosed and died; simple as one, two, three. The autopsy had just been released to the public. Cause of death: accidental overdose. Prescription pain pills my ass, I thought. But it was

better that way, better we said goodbye thinking it wasn't illicit, wasn't his fault. I scrolled down to the bottom of the page and stopped. Someone had written in the comment section, at least he died doing what he loved. And someone else added, he just liked to get high. Seething, I stomped into the kitchen and opened the freezer. I pulled out a bottle of bourbon and drank straight from the bottle. I returned to my computer, took one more drink and wrote because that's what English majors do. When I finished, I had this:

He died with heroin in his veins -

He had a girl, who he loved more than life itself.

It was his dream to fight fires and assist those in need.

He was passionate about sports. His nickname was Buzz.

He worked hard, in the tire industry, keeping cars rolling.

He loved his family and his family loved him.

He introduced me to Star Wars. We wrestled. We played. He left a legacy.

So, he struggled with an addiction, one he hid out of shame,

For those who are entangled in the dark are ostracized.

The newspaper, factual and cold, focused on his death;

Not on his life. Terrible, grotesque, revolting things were written

By idiots at the bottom of the page.

To the dunce who wrote "at least he died doing what he loved"

And to the imbecile who said he just liked to "get high"

I salute you with my resolute middle-finger

There was so much more besides the fact that

He died with heroin in his veins.

It's not beautiful, but I meant it. I posted it on my wall along with a link to the article. I finished *Mrs. Dalloway* that night. Alex was dead. I broke up with my fiancé a couple months later. Alex was dead. I continued to go to school, learning about agency and Persephone and a little boy who kept the "bad guy" locked in the basement with old records to later die by the little boy's father's hand. Alex was dead. I dated a beautiful burnet and fell head over heels. Alex was dead. I no longer mixed medications with hard liquor. Alex was dead. I put my existential self on the shelf and returned to a God with open arms. Alex was dead. Alex was dead. Alex was dead.

I quit smoking.