Beginnings and Endings

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Two and a half minutes. That’s how long Morgan sat at the stoplight, clutching his steering wheel waiting for the green arrow. For one hundred and fifty seconds he scolded himself for not rushing the yellow light. My life story right there, he thought.

It was almost one in the morning when the traffic light interrupted his night. It was a dark, cloudy night. The air had a certain heavi ness about it, like snow would be soon falling again.

Morgan didn’t want it to snow again, despite it now being the wee hours of Christmas Eve. He thought there was enough snow on the ground already. Too much maybe. He just wanted to hibernate, like a bear, until the springtime came around.

But Morgan was not a bear, so he had to wait at the stoplight at one in the morning all by himself. The light turned green and he crept through the empty intersection. The tires crunched on the old snow. A trail of exhaust marked his path.

Morgan noted the rundown hotel on the left side of the street. It appeared to be even darker than its “closed for the holidays” neighbors. Dark curtains covered the backs of the windows, hiding its naked insides. He tried to remember the name of the hotel, but it was buried beneath years of memories.

His reminiscing was interrupted when he realized he was going to miss his turn. How could he forget it? It was the only reason he had come into town. He slammed on the brakes and swerved, eyeing the rearview mirror to make sure no one caught his slip of mind. Darkness stared right back.

He had pulled into the parking lot of Gilmore’s, a family-style restaurant. It was one of the few twenty-four hour establishments in town, and the only one Morgan stopped at when he was around. In past summers he and old high school buddies would spend all night there drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes, and laughing at all the “regulars.”
He found a parking spot, not that it was hard to do since there were only four other cars there. He turned the car off and pulled the keys out of the ignition. He threw the door open and emerged from the car, stretching his stiff joints like he had just finished a four-hour drive, not the half hour trip it really was.

The pavement was black—wet from the melting snow. Still, piles of it sat next to the building, covering the bushes that ran the perimeter of Gilmore's. Morgan let out a sigh, his breath dissipating right in front of him. It felt a lot warmer than it looked, however, but still Morgan shivered on his way to the door.

His hand reached for the cold black handle as the door opened. He didn’t even notice the elderly couple coming out until they were half way out the door.

“Merry Christmas!” The man was a tall but stocky man with silver hair, a long dark coat and pants, and a red knitted scarf. His bride was considerably shorter than he, much thinner as well. Her dark curly hair was hidden under a white scarf. She kept walking, ignoring Morgan.

Morgan forced a lifeless smile and a slight nod, avoiding any Christmas cheer. He walked into the lobby. It was brightly lit and considerably warmer. A Christmas tree sat in the corner, drowning in red and green garland and enough primary colored lights for a tree twice its size.

A middle-aged woman in a maroon collared shirt and black slacks came out from a room in back behind the counter with the cash register on it. A bright smile appeared on her face.

“Hi! Welcome to Gilmore’s this evening—well, morning now!” She grabbed a menu from behind the counter. “Will anyone be joining you?”

Morgan coldly responded, “Don’t think so. Just me.” He rubbed his eyes. Was he really tired? He couldn’t tell anymore.

“Smoking or non?” Her smile persisted.

“Smoking, please.” He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his coat pocket.

“Great! Follow me!”

She led him to the back of the restaurant. There were three other people dining tonight. Two older women, maybe early forties, sat in a booth a couple booths away from his. A girl close to his own age, possibly twenty, sat in the booth next to his facing him.

The waitress set the menu on the table. “What can I get you to drink?” Her smile seemed to be doing all her talking.

“I’ll take a coffee. Decaf.” Morgan’s annoyance did his.

“Would you like--”
Morgan interrupted. “I would like some cream too.” He tried to break her spirit, but was so far ineffectual.

“Great! I’ll be right back!”

Morgan took a cigarette out of the pack. He reached back into his coat for his lighter, a black Zippo. He put the cigarette between his dry lips and flicked open the lighter’s lid, spinning the wheel and igniting the flame. He took a long drag and held it in for a few seconds. He exhaled, a cloud of smoke shooting for the ceiling.

Morgan glanced at the girl in the booth next to his. She was concentrating on a book. He couldn’t read the title, but it was a mammoth of a book. Must have been 750 pages. By his estimation she was three-quarters way through.

Then like a phantom of cheer, the waitress appeared at the table with a coffee mug, a copper-colored coffee pot, and a small dish of cream packets. “Here’s your coffee!” She poured some into his mug, spilling some on the table. Her hands were shaking. Morgan thought she should probably be drinking decaf as well, but fought the urge to say so out loud. He gave her half a smile.

“Did you make up your mind, hon?” Her eyebrows stretched higher.

“I’m sorry, what?” Morgan must have been tired after all.

“Your meal? Did you want more time?” Her hands were on her hips and she had cocked her head to one side.

“Oh, yeah.” He forgot all about the menu sitting right in front of him. “Yeah, I could use a few more minutes.”

“Mmmkay, dear. I’ll be right back.”

He opened the menu unsure of how hungry he was. After a few brief moments of looking at the photos of perfect specimens he decided on a simple breakfast. He always did like the pancakes there, and sausage always sounded good.

He glanced up and accidentally crossed eyes with the girl at the next booth. She wasn’t extremely attractive, at least not by Cosmo standards, but he wouldn’t say she wasn’t pretty. She was thin, but her body hid under a hooded sweatshirt. Her brown straight hair was tied back in a tight ponytail.

She smiled. Morgan quickly looked away. He felt like he had been staring at her. He looked at the menu but didn’t actually look at it. After a moment his eyes stole a glance at the girl again. He couldn’t help it. He was staring, but didn’t know why. He already had a girlfriend. He corrected himself. He used to have a girlfriend. But he didn’t need one now.

But the girl had gone back to reading her book anyway, and he was history to her. Forgotten. This made him feel sad, oddly. After a moment her eyes rose and
met his again. She smiled again.

“You’re staring.” Her smile told him she was okay being stared at.

“I am?” He tried to play it down. “Sorry.” A nervous smile appeared on his face. “I’m just tired. Spacing off.”

She broke eye contact and looked behind him. A voice let him know what she was looking at.

“What can I get for you, hon?” The waitress’ excessively smiling face was staring at him. Almost through him.

“Yeah, I’ll have the pancakes with sausage.”

“Mmm... delicious!” She licked her lips. Her eyes ravaged his with their intensity.

“Yeah...” Such an odd response. He didn’t know what to say to that.

“I’ll put your order in.” Her left hand rested on Morgan’s shoulder. “I’ll be back with your food in a bit.” She turned and walked away, letting her fingers drag across his shoulder.

He extinguished his cigarette, snuffing it out against the clear glass ashtray. He looked up to see the girl sit down in his booth, a gentle smile greeting him.

“Hope you don’t mind,” she softly said.

“No.” He motioned to the seat. “Not at all.”

He looked deeply into her eyes. They were blue, calm. Much more kind than the eyes of the waitress, but still intense. She had pale skin; slight blemishes added the only color to her face, contoured by her thin nose.

Morgan searched for the words to describe her, but “intriguing” kept coming to mind. Maybe there was attraction there. Maybe she would be worth his time.

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Jo’s eyes screamed her silent rage. Her eyebrows were tensely furrowed. Her hands had formed fists—not for fighting, but out of helpless frustration. The blood rushed her cheeks, giving her pale skin color.

She opened her mouth, giving a voice to her anger. “Get the fuck out of my apartment!”

Her boyfriend still just sat on the couch facing her. Looking straight up at her, he responded. “Your apartment?” He remained cool. He even laughed a little.

“Your apartment? Babe, I believe I pay the rent for this dump.” He grabbed her scrawny arm. He stood at her, a crazed look in his eye. “You’re in my apartment,
“Ouch! You’re hurting me!” His hand gripped her arm tighter. Her angry façade fell, revealing her horror and pain. Jo’s voice squeaked. “Let me go!”

“You got it, babe.” He stood up. He seemed so much more imposing now, but Jo didn’t know where it came from. He was so quiet, so reserved when they first met. It was like he lured her in. It had been two years and he was getting worse and worse. He could never have too much control.

He took his muscular hands around her hips and shoved her backwards. She spun around just to catch the television set with her ribcage. She crashed to the floor in a wave of pain while the TV rattled against the wall.

He took a step forward and stared below at Jo, a helpless mouse at his feet. She cowered into the fetal position while nursing her side. Her face winced, her clenched eyelids holding back the tears. How could she not have seen this monster sooner?

He nudged her stomach with his boot. She let out a groan. “You’re fine, Jo. Get up.” His stern voice couldn’t move her. She remained balled up on the floor quivering.

“Fine.” He stepped over her. “I’m leaving.” He reached the door and paused, turning back to her. “Don’t wait up for me.” He opened the door and walked out, slamming it behind him.

A cold draft rushed over Jo’s trembling body, still lying in the middle of the room.

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“I’m Jo, by the way.” The girl smiled. Her smile was so much nicer than the waitress’. So much less harsh. “What’s yours?”

“I’m…uh…Morgan.” He wasn’t quite ready for the forwardness she brought.

“Well, Morgan, what brings you to Gilmore’s this early on Christmas Eve all by yourself–” She interrupted herself. “Oh my god, you’re waiting for someone, aren’t you. How stupid of me.”

Morgan laughed. The first genuine smile of the night spread across his face.

“No, I’m not waiting. The seat’s yours.” He didn’t want her to leave, but he still felt like he was just staring at her.

“So…did I hear you ordering pancakes?” Her eyes lit up with excitement.

“I use to always eat the pancakes here. I loved them—ooh, and with the apricot
syrup!"

“They are good.” He liked pancakes just as much as the next person, but he just
didn’t get as excited as Jo did apparently. He glanced at her table but didn’t see any
plates or used silverware. “You already eat?”

“Oh, no.” The excitement fled from her face. “I usually just get coffee to drink
while I read.”

“I see.” Morgan paused. “Well, you’ll have to excuse me when I eat my deli-
cious pancakes,” he teased.

“Oh, stop.” She laughed.

A moment of silence separated them. Morgan wanted to say something, any­
thing, before Jo became uninterested and left him. Her eyes had already wandered
to the window next to their booth. He just watched her sit there.

Her playful eyes shifted towards him. A kindness rung in her voice. “You never
answered my question.”

“Which was?” Morgan replied, a bead of sweat forming on his brow. He hon­
estly couldn’t remember the original question asked.

“You have nothing better to do than come here, all alone, at one in the morning
on Christmas Eve?”

“Just home for Christmas break. I wanted to get here at least once while I was
around.”

“Alone?” Morgan didn’t even mind her prodding.

“Well, all my friends are gone.” He stopped. “What about you? Why are you
here all alone on Christmas Eve?”

With that the waitress interrupted again, wrecking into their conversation like
a tropical storm. “Here’s your food, hon.” She smiled still. Her sunken eyes glared
still. Her greasy dark brown hair hung from her head still, dangerously close to his
food. “Hope you’re hungry!”

“You bet,” Morgan muttered.

She set a plate with a stack of pancakes and some sausage on the table. Steam
rose, carrying with it the sweet scent of his breakfast.

“What kind of syrup would you like, dear?” Her hand once again found his
shoulder.

“Uhh … apricot please.” He glanced in Jo’s direction and she shot him a warm
smile.

“Mmmkay, I’ll be right back, hon.” She spun around and walked away. The
smell of grease from the kitchen wafted towards his face.
"You like apricot too!?" Morgan had never met anyone so excited about a syrup.

"Of course," Morgan quickly replied, despite the fact that he had never even had apricot syrup before. "It's delicious...and orange." They both laughed, his more nervous than hers.

The waitress reappeared at Morgan's side. She slammed a clear bottle of the thick golden-orange goo on the table. "If you need anything else, just holler, okay?" She grinned and wandered back to the kitchen.

"I think she's crazy," Morgan whispered. "She's either tweaked out, or she's trying to come home with me. Maybe both."


"Really?"

"Oh, yeah. You should see her kids." She paused. "Adorable."

Another awkward silence hung in the air. Vanessa's booming laughter echoed out of the kitchen. Morgan and Jo were the only customers in the restaurant by now. The other two women must have snuck out while he was distracted with Jo.

He tried to cover the silence by stuffing his mouth with pancakes. They were soaked in apricot syrup, but as it turns out he really liked it. The sweet syrup, creamy butter, and warm pancakes reminded him of what a real meal should be, not a calorically analyzed piece of stale bread with a "health spread." Oh, how he hated the meals his ex-girlfriend had made for him.

Jo stared out the window. Her welcoming eyes began to show how tired she was. Her hands played with a straw wrapper left on the table from the customers before them. A residual smile faintly hung on her face. She was tired, but she seemed content.

Morgan broke the silence. "So...you never answered my question."

"Oh, what am I doing here?" She paused, gathering her words as if she were stringing together pearls. "Well, my parents are gone and my friends are drunk. So I figured 'why not?'"

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Jo sat on their couch in their apartment. She was still nursing her sore ribs from the disagreement they had earlier. The skin had already turned a dark purple color. Thinking of the ruptured tissue made her sick. The incessant aching made
her sick. The thought that she had become the abused girlfriend made her sick. And still she sat on that couch.

The couch itself was tattered and ragged, golden brown in color. There were dark stains scattered throughout the material, leaving it stiff, almost crusty. They had gotten it second- or third-hand, so those stains could have been anything (though she had a sneaking suspicion most were blood and semen.) After awhile she began to care less and less as the rest of the apartment began to match it.

Jo was watching their television set, but not really watching it. Just staring at it. Analyzing it. The television audience cheered and yelled at some anonymous game show contestant, but she didn't hear it. Another channel let out the last lines of "What Child Is This" before cutting to break, but Jo was already somewhere else. She was concentrating on the cold, grey cinderblocks on which the TV sat. Analyzing the frayed carpet that ran the dimensions of the room. It was a sick green color, which did a better job of hiding its stains than the couch, but not by much. The whole apartment had become stained. Her life. Stained.

"How the hell did I get here?" Jo thought out loud. She looked around. A single lamp cast a dull yellow glow from across the room. The television spewed harsh white images towards the couch through a layer of static. On the other side of the bay window a night sky looked in, absorbing light. The walls, once white, now enclosed the room in pale grey.

She just wanted to cry. The grungy room looked how she felt. Deteriorated. She wasn't always like this. And neither was her boyfriend. He didn't always treat her this poorly. Or if he did she didn't see it. At first. Two years ago. Now it was painfully obvious. She felt like everyone was staring at the mess she had gotten into.

She couldn't even say where he was for sure. The only thing she knew for certain was that he'd be a drunken mess when he returned. He always did this. They would fight and he would run away and return late at night, full of booze. But she had had enough. She couldn't keep on like this. Tears began to well in her eyes. Her ribs seemed to pulsate in agony.

A live studio audience's cheers cut through the television static, startling her. "I need to get out of here."

She reached between two of the cushions on the couch, fishing for something. Her fingers brushed against the cold wooden handle. The handle she had planted, for a time when she was stronger. She didn't need to look at it to know about the sharp metal blade attached to handle.

Jo heard footsteps outside the apartment. Her hand squeezed the handle. The
television set cheered again. With her other hand she turned the television off and tossed the remote to the floor, leaving her alone in the lamp's glow waiting for the footsteps to get to their door.

They stopped, creating a moment of silence. Then the doorknob turned and the door violently swung open. Jo watched it in silent slow motion until it crashed into the wall.

Morgan stood there clutching a bottle of cheap whiskey. “Bitch, what the fuck are you still doing up!?”

She clutched the knife.

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Morgan looked at his watch. Three thirty-seven. They had been talking for over two hours by now. Time seemed to have flown by. He hadn’t anticipated being out this late. Of course, he hadn’t anticipated meeting anyone either.

“You know, I should get going,” Morgan said. He didn’t want to though.

The smile faded from Jo’s face. She nodded. “Yeah, I suppose so.” She slowly stretched in her seat. She gave him a short smile, but her eyes were sad. She stood up and went back to her booth, grabbing her coat and purse.

Morgan stood up from his seat. A wave of drowsiness crashed over his body and he dreaded the drive home even more than he already did. He grabbed his coat and threw it on sloppily. He rubbed his eyes.

Jo was leaving money for her check on the table. Morgan took out his wallet and did the same. He took his time. He didn’t want to rush to the goodbye.

“I’m just going to throw this out there,” Morgan said. “My girlfriend just broke up with me, but then I met you. I think I might really like you, and I would like to see you again. Can I call you?” He waited for a response, some sort of a facial expression, anything to let him know what Jo was thinking.

Jo paused for a moment. Morgan’s heart stopped. She opened her purse and dug out a small piece of paper and a blue pen. She leaned over the table and wrote on the piece of paper and folded it up. She turned to him and her eyes said “yes.” She put the paper in his hands and they headed for the lobby.

Vanessa was in the lobby counting money. She looked up with a grin on her face. “Good night! See you soon, darling!” Then the smile shut off and her body shrunk down when she went back to counting money.

Jo walked outside and Morgan followed. She was the first to speak. “Well, I
guess this is where we part.”

Morgan nodded. He looked towards his car. There were only two others in the lot. “Do you have a car here? Do you need a ride?”

Jo shook her head. “No, I don’t live far from here. I can walk.”

“Are you sure?” Morgan hoped that she would reconsider.

She smiled. “Yeah, I’m sure. But I’ll see you again.”

Morgan replied, “Sure.”

Jo held out her hand with a rigid aggressiveness to shake his. Morgan timidly shook her hand and said, “It was nice to meet you.”

“It was a pleasure, Morgan.” She broke away from him and started walking in the opposite direction. He walked over to his car and got in. He put the key in the ignition and started the car. It roared to life and he waited for the engine to warm up.

He dug into his pocket to get the piece of paper Jo had written her number on. He pulled it out and unfolded it. A phone number was scrawled in neat handwriting. He folded it up and put it back in his coat again. He would have to call her in a few days. He had a good feeling about this girl.

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