Handwriting

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From my hazy squint, I can barely discern the red glow of the numbers on my digital clock. Or maybe it’s 3:28. I mentally debate leaving the warmth of the black down comforter to check the time, but am struck by the counter-productivity of further waking myself. Insomnia is insomnia, regardless of a five-minute gap. Still, if I knew the true time, perhaps my body would finally get the message that now was the only opportunity to sleep for the next twenty-four hours.

*If sleep were a matter of mere will power, the last four hours would not have been wasted,* I think, rolling to my stomach to take the pressure off my hips. Forcing my breaths to come slowly, rhythmically, I retrace my evening. No coffee, diet coke, or even innocuous chocolate. No mid-afternoon nap. *There is no reason to be awake,* I bitterly realize and further chastise my body to submit to slumber.

Forcefully closing my eyelids, the initial comfort of my chin resting on my pillow gives way to a subtle pain in at the base of my neck. In frustration, I shift from my stomach to my back and stare up at the ceiling.

*I wonder who originally invented popcorn ceilings. I’ll bet it was by mistake—they used old congealed paint and had to get creative to explain the mottled texture of the finish.*

The ceiling remained the only portion of my flat yet to be renovated by Scott. Turning my head to the side, I note his long dark lashes, fluttering every so often before resting peacefully once again. Eyelashes like that are completely wasted on a man. I wonder if Scott is ever thankful for his eyelashes.

Rising from the bed, my eyes are already adjusted to the darkness of the room. Looking around, I see neatly hung photographs of the two of us together. Posed in matching ensemble, smiles Photoshopped to perfection, we make quite the striking couple. My stocking-clad feet make no noise as I pad across the room. Reaching to the bottom shelf of a sleek black bookcase, I hesitate.

*Perhaps it would be better just to practice deep breathing. In, out, in, out.* However, a more persistent thought smothers my mantra: *Your psychologist has never had insomnia.*

Gingerly, my hands graze a gray nesting cube solely occupying the bottom shelf. A cool draft from the window causes my legs to become prickly, with tiny hairs rising in rebellion—the elegant hardwood floors
do little to protect from its steady flow. The familiarity of routine numbs my senses. With the cube in my lap, I crouch to the floor and remove a composition notebook covered with bright paper. It is soft to the touch; the pages naturally flutter to a center point, no doubt controlled by the creased spine, worn with repetition.

*It’s ironic—while handwriting can be used to positively identify criminals it certainly changes over the years, I think, recognizing a younger version of myself.* Life pours from the book.

**Scott and Jenny, or should I say Bonnie and Clyde. ♥**

And we’re there again, smiling, more drunk on each other than alcohol, amidst friends at a theme party. I thumb to another random page.

Skiing black diamonds, clearly.

The ski trip to Breckenridge spent entirely on the bunny hill. *I never quite understood how to move beyond the “pizza slice.”*

My directionless fingers jumble our past. Scott and I at law school graduation, celebrating my degree by shoving sheet cake in each other’s faces. The caption reads: ♥*Perhaps a premonition?!* ♥

A free neon drink bracelet peaks from the top of the book, beckoning me to open an earlier page. I already know it’s South Padre, Spring Break 2001.

“Iiiii’m coming out so you’d better get this party started,” Pink blares in my memory. *The feeling of sand, gritty on the stairs, Scott’s dark lashes in the moonlight, both of us descending to the beach below—*

“Jen, what are you doing?”

My adrenaline spikes as Scott’s voice cuts through my memories. Dropping the notebook, my heart begins to race as though I’ve been caught doing something illegal.

“Nothing. Well, something. It’s really a big nothing, I just couldn’t sleep.”

The words sound foreign in my mouth, breaking my introspection, and echo in the minimalist room.

“Are you taking anything? I thought you said Dr. Dowson gave you something to help you relax and fall asleep.”

*Oh yes, the Lunesta.*

“He did give me a pill to take. Apparently, it’s supposed to knock you right out.”

*But I didn’t take it,* I think, cringing at the idea of artificial respite.

“Clearly, it’s not working,” says Scott, with a tinge of frustration.
I wonder if omitting details counts as dishonesty, since the other person’s assumptions, not your information, are the falsehood.

His gaze drifts to the floor, where the notebook lies, splayed open to a random page.

“What is that? Jen, is there something you aren’t telling me?”

My hands hold up the notebook like a shield, revealing a photo of us wearing ridiculous sunglasses in some second hand store.

The eighties have nothing on this!

I grin, remembering the old man who chastised us for mocking his valuable merchandise.

“It’s nothing really,” I sputter, wondering why I have the urgent need to explain myself. “Just an old notebook I used to keep of us. There are ticket stubs, pictures, little captions, you know, like this time at that second hand store when that cranky old man…”

My voice breaks off into uncontrolled laughter as I remember the crackled voice shooing us out of the store, hands threatening with a gnarled cane.

Why isn’t he laughing? I wonder.

Scott bends his knees, crouching so we are eye to eye.

“Jen, are you alright?”

His face looks concerned and irritated, a bleary mix of interrupted sleep.

He must not be able to see the pictures in the darkness of the room.

I clutch the notebook and walk over to the window, hoping that the moonlight will illuminate the evidence of my sanity.

“See, you can almost imagine that old man in the background. Look, there’s the tip of his cane, remember…”

Again, I cannot stop laughing, picturing the cantankerous storeowner. Scott’s eyes are confused, squinting narrowly at the page.

“The moonlight isn’t enough for you is it?” I think aloud.

He must not be able to see the picture.

I swiftly reach my hand out, flicking on our overhead light. Where the former chandelier hung, an environmentally friendly dome light sparks to life. It flickers on, as though mustering the energy to consistently shine.

“See Scott, it’s that thrift store!” I excitedly explain, pointing at the page.

The harsh florescence reveals Scott’s narrow eyes, transforming the squint into furrows of anger.

“Damn it Jennifer, I can see the picture. What are you doing? It’s 3:42 in the morning, we both have work tomorrow, and you’re just sitting
awake, staring through some stupid picture book.”

His words sting. The sound of buzzing florescence fills the room.

Starring down at the worn notebook in my hands, shame mingles with regret. My throat tightens as I swallow hard, opening my eyes wide to avoid errant tears.

“Jen, babe, I’m sorry. We’re both tired, and with the light in my eyes and waking up without you, I lost my temper. It’s just that you’re so hard to understand these days. You seem so distant. You understand, don’t you?”

“Yes, we’re both tired,” I parrot back.

I don’t understand.

“Just come back to bed, put this away.”

His smooth palms press the cover of the notebook shut. Removing it from my hands, he places it on the bookcase, cluttering the clean line of the second shelf. With his right hand, he turns off the light and returns to his side of the bed. I remain, standing frozen by the window. Brushing against me, white curtains move noiselessly in the wind. The silence is louder than the buzzing florescence.

“Are you coming?”

Scott does not raise his head from the pillow—his voice echoes off the opposite wall.

“Yes.”

It’s time for sleeping.

My stocking-clad feet make no noise as I return to the king-sized mattress. It’s the largest bed I’ve ever owned, with enough room that Scott and I can both sprawl out entirely. I remember his excitement at the luxury of our new addition.

“Just think Jen, you’ll never have to curl yourself up to fit in this bed,” he said.

I curl up on my half of the bed anyway, rolling into a cocoon of black comforter.

“Scott?”

“Yes?”

“Do you ever think about handwriting?”

I feel the tension release in the comforter as Scott turns to face the center of the bed. I choose not to face him.

“Jen, what are you talking about? Do I think what about handwriting?”

“You know, how it changes over the years. When I was in the eighth grade, I dotted all my i’s with circles.”

“I guess I’m not following you. What do circle-dotted i’s have to do
with anything?”

His voice sounds tired and confused, with a hint of curiosity.

“In the eighth grade, I dotted all my i’s with circles. By the time I reached high school, though, I had to grow up and started writing more legibly with standard printing and normal i’s. In college, my style transitioned into a sloppy mix of cursive and printing as I scrambled to copy down tort law.”

“Okay, so it’s changed over the years. What does this have to do with sleeping?”

“Nothing, I guess, it’s just funny how handwriting changes over the years. It’s like we become different people.”

“Right, yeah, whatever. We become different people. ‘Night Jenny, get some sleep.”

The comforter pulls tautly across the mattress as Scott returns to facing the wall. I refuse to loosen my cocoon to break the tension.

In, out, in out. Although deep breathing is supposed to lull people to sleep, it simply makes me feel like I’m hyperventilating. Opening my eyes, I can’t help but notice the notebook. Its worn cover stands out against the smooth, black shelf. A corner of pages hangs diagonally over the edge.

Scott probably doesn’t want to see that in the morning.

I listen to his even breathing and slowly uncurl from the comforter. The tension releases, bunching the covers into waves of black.

Stepping silently to the floor, I return to my place by the bookshelf. The air around me is cool and still, caressing my skin, inviting goose bumps to rise. Grabbing the notebook, I lift it from the shelf and place it back in the gray cube. Pressing it closed, I finally feel my eyelids begin to droop.

Finally, I can muster four hours if I instantly fall asleep.

Silently, I return to my side of the bed. Slipping beneath the sheets, they return the warmth I left in them. I take a final glance at the bookshelf, my eyes heavy. A white crumpled square rests at its base, no larger than a box of cigarettes. It must have fallen out of the notebook when Scott closed the cover.

Although I know its contents by heart, the sight of the paper compels me to read it again.

I’ll just grab it quickly and then sleep.

Turning my head towards Scott, I see his long eyelashes twitch as he enters a deeper level of sleep. My feet slip out from the covers, followed by my legs, which carry me to the bookshelf once again.

My hands unfold the creases, which have torn slightly from overuse.
Hey Jen,

Although my eyes trace the words, my mind recites them by memory.

I used to be such a solid sleeper, but on this night I cannot get you out of my head. My shirt still smells like your shampoo. I remember when I first met you—you borrowed my book and spilled coffee all over it. You were so embarrassed that you never told me what happened. I just found $40 stuffed inside the cover. The next day, I smiled at you and asked if you wanted to grab coffee, since you obviously didn’t get to enjoy the last cup. You have no idea how nervous I felt. When you said yes, I knew I had the opportunity of a lifetime.

I spent hours planning the perfect date. I overthought every detail. I even planned out exactly what I was going to say, which I immediately forgot the moment I saw you. If I stammered over my words, it was only because my heart moved faster than my mind.

I know it’s far too early to say that I love you. We hardly know each other, after all. But something deep within me knows that I need you, and I cannot sleep because from the moment I met you I discovered what I’ve been missing.

I cannot wait to love you.

-Scott

Gently refolding the note, I open the gray cube and reach for the notebook. Securing the note in the cover, my body longs to finally rest. The serene quiet is interrupted by the sound of quick bare feet on the hard wood floor.

“Jennifer, this is too much for me! I cannot possibly sleep with you getting up like this.”

I turn to face him, the memories resting loosely in my hands.

“What is with you and that notebook? Give it to me!”

A defiant voice inside my head screams “Never!” as I meekly shake my
head.

“Honestly, this is ridiculous, give it to me or I’ll take it from you. We are sleeping tonight. Not reading, not reminiscing, we are sleeping so we can function tomorrow.”

As he finishes speaking, his arms extend quickly for the notebook. My fingers tighten their grasp around the binding. Like children playing tug of war, we pull on opposite ends.

“Don’t! Stop it! You’ll tear it!”

“It won’t tear. It’s a notebook. You need to let go!”

My delicate hands are no match for Scott’s powerful grasp. The notebook slips from my fingers, throwing both of us backwards from the release of tension. As we fall to the floor, Scott releases the prize to catch his fall.

For a moment, it flutters through the years of our relationship.

It hits the ceiling, then slams to the ground, and popcorn falls softly, raining remnants of the past.

Julie Young is a recent graduate of Iowa State University in Psychology and Journalism. Originally from Indianola, Young plans to go to Ghana with Doctors Without Borders before pursuing her doctorate in School Psychology this fall at the University of Minnesota.