

## Jordan Martich

### Discovery, Not Destination, Gives Meaning to Life

“No mom, I don’t; I will NEVER buy a fucking gun. Okay?” I hate these conversations.

“But honey I just can’t sleep at night knowing how vulnerable you are. Aren’t you scared?”

“Scared of what? The real world? Of course I am, it’s a dangerous fucking place. But that’s not gonna draw me into the system perpetuating the violence.” I do not know what I am talking about. It is four in the morning in Seattle, where I have just set foot. Upon finding the nearest all-night diner, I sat down and placed a call to my mother, knowing that she would be waking up for work.

“But why Seattle? I thought you said you wanted to be someplace warm; it rains there all of the time sweetie.”

“It’s not raining now, and I don’t really know why I’m here. I guess I’m looking for something... like always.” I have not slept in what seems like a week except for short little bursts in a series of strange backseats. Hitchhiking may be illegal, but god damn is it easy.

The waitress is nice enough to refill my coffee cup for a fifth time and I smile graciously. If it weren’t for me, this entire diner could fit into the 1950’s perfectly. She’s got a vintage looking polka-dot waitress uniform and the same blank white apron that covers the torso of so many of those employed in the food service industry. The booth I am sitting in, and those throughout the room are made out of that glittery red vinyl that for some reason reminds me of what Elvis Presley means. Sitting across from me is my backpack filled with clothing, minimal supplies of food and first aid, a roll of duct tape and my phone charger.

“How long is this going on for? You know, I miss you like crazy. And it’s starting to seem like you just don’t want to be with your family ever again...”

“Mom, you know that’s not true. There are just things I want to see. I NEED this trip more than you know... It’s not that I don’t miss you guys too. I do”, but right now I have to keep searching. I am so very tired. I want to break down. I want to beg her to buy me a ticket on the next plane home; and she would. I want to fall asleep in the 1950’s and wake up at home, in that queen-sized bed.

Even at home though, there would be that longing. I could never be alone, always awake and drowning in the despair. In the daylight hours finding a companion is easy enough, but when the sun goes down and the night sets in most of my friends are yearning for sleep. At least out here in the unknown I have no one to rely on, and so must keep my wits and charm about me to woo the friendliness of strangers. It is a complicated game to play, but the rules keep my head busy. The waitress has come back with a large ceramic plate in her hands. On top is a grilled cheese sandwich and French fries. She sets it down and smiles at the excited look on my face. I try to explain that the coffee is enough and that I really don’t have money for much more than that but she waves me off and walks away.

“Just hurry it up I guess. I really never wanted you to leave; you know that right?” she whispers, wanting me to assure her that the intentions surrounding my departure were in no way ill-natured.

“Of course I know ma. Just... after everything that happened, this is where I have to be. Well, not *here* but away. Someplace new. I just need the excitement back, if only for a little while.” She sounds so lonely over the phone. I can see her, lying back in that worn blue recliner with the TV muted. She doesn’t want to wake my younger brother, fast asleep up stairs.

After a long silence we say goodbye and hang-up. I stand up and wave my pack of cigarettes so that the waitress, seemingly bored with her magazine, can see that I’m going to be back after this smoke. She decides to join me.

“So, where are you from?” she asks me politely, but I can see the dull glaze in her eyes. I hand her a cigarette and she lets me light it for her.

“I’m from Indiana. How about you?” and I light my own.

“Uda. And I’m from here I guess. I grew up in the city.”

“That’s great. It’s really nice of you to let me hang out here for so long. I promise it won’t be much more,” my eyes scan the nearest street corner for signs of life.

“Not a problem. What exactly are you waiting for sweetie?” she is maybe 28 years old and she calls me sweetie.

“I’ve got some friends who go to school here. I’m not sure what the place is called. I figure I’ll call them in an hour or so and get directions to the dorms or whatever. They know that I’m coming, I just got here a little earlier than I thought I would.”

“How long was the drive?”

“Somewhere around three weeks. I don’t have a car so I’ve been sort of hitchhiking,” I look down at my feet, expecting to feel shame. Looking up, I find that she is holding my body still with these huge doe eyes. I don’t know how I didn’t notice them before, or the tattoos seeping out from under her shirt sleeves and peeking out into what little cleavage her work uniform allows. We go on like this for a while, with her staring at me, until I take a drag and-

“Come and stay with me,” and she really said it just like that. I was confused because not many people make that kind of connection to a stranger this fast. I start to shake my head and-

“I’m off in ten minutes. You can get some sleep on my couch. Just give me a story or two,” she is determined. I have never been stupid enough to deny anything so miniscule to someone so determined. I assure myself that she really means this.

“Thanks? I’d be glad to!”

Those enormous eyes swell with excitement, “Let me go finish rolling some silverware and we can go.”

She rushes inside and then back out because she forgot about the cigarette in her hand. I laugh and smoke them both at once, finding the pure buzz I’ve needed.

In less than ten minutes we are walking swiftly down the sidewalks, taking left turns towards her apartment. She has my hand gripped tightly within her own and I can feel my skin absorbing her thick sweat like a sponge. At a little after five in the morning, people have begun forcing themselves into their cars, or their shoes, or their jobs. They are exhausted and I am exhausted and, no matter who you are, the spinning that this planet does can make you dizzy and tired.

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Uda lives on the fifth floor of a quaint looking local coffee shop on the east side of the city and the air is thin and sweet in her living room. There are paintings on the walls all done in the same style, with splotches of paint fighting one another for space on the canvas. I try to connect some of the paint stains on the floorboards to the artwork on the walls as she takes a “quick shower”. Having spent all of the time I’ve ever gotten in any shower ever in a deep pseudo-meditational state of being, I honestly have no idea how long she could take.

She let me know that she has one roommate who is never at home. I do my best to guess at which CD's, movies, and artwork are hers but find that I cannot. There is incense burning on the table before me and it smells something like a bong shop.

"Are you hungry?" She is out of the shower, already dressed and brushing her wet hair as she begins making breakfast.

"No, thanks. You gave me that grilled cheese, remember?"

"But that was nothing. You didn't even finish it. Do you like eggs?"

"Yeah sure, scrambled if you have to," I can tell that she won't let it go.

I walk into the kitchen to help wherever I can, but she has it all under control. She smiles at me as she pushes maybe a dozen eggs around in an enormous frying pan.

"So what was in Indiana... I mean what made you come out here?" She tries to hide the curiosity, but I can tell that she wants something to believe in.

"I had to get out. You know before the whole mortgage, kids, cubicle thing happened," there is no meaning in my voice. I replay it in my head and it just sounds inconsiderate.

"That's not it. It would be a good reason but you're too young for that," she knows already.

I take a pause, not wanting to make this any more dramatic than it needs to be. I have no need for sympathy, no practical use for it. I want to be rid of this scar, a blank piece of canvas ready to be drawn on by strangers.

"My best friend killed himself so I packed up and left on a meaningless trip with no direction just like we had always planned... only it's not how we planned because I am alone and I still don't know why," and in my voice there is so much smoke, resentment for having to explain my behavior at all.

She continues to stir the eggs around with her back to me. There is bright sunlight coming in through the kitchen window. I look at my skin and there is a visible layer of filth built up.

"Well..." and that's all she said. I can't even grasp a feel for the tone she used. She dishes out the eggs onto two plates and I take mine quietly, whispering my thanks. She takes hers into the other room with the table and the incense so I follow.

I finish eating and get up to wash my dish and she says, "I don't know what to say to that. I know that nothing I say will help... but if you want to take a shower, you're welcome to it."

Hearing her say it out loud brings my spirit back up. It's not like I hadn't thought about Cameron's death every day since, but hearing someone let it go so easily was soothing.

"Thanks. Can I use these towels?" I point to a stack by the bathroom door.

"Yep that's fine... I want a nicer story when you get out."

I chuckle, "I guess I'll work one up," and the rinse feels like redemption.