

Daniel Carbone

The Wishing Well

Her dad's shitty little house smells of dog crap from across the street. The front lawn is littered with what looks like garage sale paraphernalia, but all of the junk on the ground is meant to be decorative. There is a fake plastic dog sitting on a bench swing, and something that looks like a bird feeder or water bath besides the fake dog, but I can't be sure which. Other little decorations combine with the browning grass and salty ocean air to create the feeling of a retirement home. But this is her dad's house, and I tell myself this is a good idea.

She exits the two bedroom trailer disguised as a home and starts walking towards my car. She is average height, but her legs and torso look long. I can't tell if this affect is created because of her short asymmetrical haircut falling over her square framed glasses or because of her petite hourglass shaped body that projects energy into the atmosphere. She is pretty. I never end up liking pretty girls. She opens the door and leans her head towards me, and I hear my heart beat forming a crescendo in my ears.

"Hey, you. You're late," she says.

"Sorry, I got lost," I say. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah. Let's go—wait! Let me grab my GPS." She hurries back towards the house and jumps over one of the random benches in-between my car and the front door. After a moment, she jogs back to my car.

Her name is Toni, and we were in the same creative writing class the previous semester. I remember her stumbling into class drunk each morning as I was trying my hand at the perfect poker face, convincing my classmates that my depressing poetry was about someone I used to know.

She sat next to me in class one day. She was late and one of the sober students had stolen her usual seat. She looked at me, asked me something about what she had missed. I shook my head and shrugged my shoulders, and that was the extent of our interaction at the time. We have met once outside of class. She came to a Fourth of July barbeque at the beginning of the month, just a few days after I responded to her email about my roommate advertisement. But this is different. This isn't a barbeque or an 11 a.m. creative writing class. It's just the two of us. This is still a good idea.

I don't say much of anything on the ride from North Jersey to Atlantic county. I turn the volume up on the radio and drown out my thoughts, hoping the music can slow my pulse and keep her from running away from its rhythm. She doesn't seem out of place, sitting there in the front passenger seat of my car. Eventually, we find an apartment we both like in Brigantine. We need another roommate to afford the rent, but we agree that when we do, this is the place. "I could see this being a home," I say. She looks at me and smiles. Her glasses draw my attention back and forth between her eyes and lips.

"I can't wait," she says, lightly hitting my shoulder. "The first night we move in, I'll probably be rolling around on the floor, drunk, or dancing in a sports bra. It's going to be great." It seems like her, from what I know, but the statement is open-ended.

"You roll around on the floor when you're drunk?" I ask.

"Yeah, why not? You think you can handle that?" I tell her I think I can manage. She knows a little bit about me already. We talked at the barbeque before our original roommate backed out. We've talked for the last few weeks online and sent little flirtatious hearts back and forth by text message. She knows I am damaged. I know she is too. And I can't help thinking girls like her are reason.

A few months ago, my old roommates and I, the ones who came before Toni, sat in a booth at J.D.'s, trying to get out of the sea of drunken people that occupy the bar every Thirsty Thursday during the Stockton school term. My female roommate,

Sarah, was dressed like a vampire, wearing a set of false teeth with fake blood running from the corners of her lips down to below her chin. She was wearing a tight dress with embroidered white lace that made the gown look like one Madame Bovary would have found appealing. She had on an improvised corset that my other roommate, Chris, helped me fashion for her out of duct tape when she was wearing nothing but her underwear. It was just a few days before Halloween.

In the booth, the three of us were laughing until my roommates started talking about the costumes around the bar and all the “potential” they saw in our peers as suitable boyfriends and girlfriends. Chris went outside to smoke a few cigarettes, and then Sarah went to the bathroom. She must have returned to the sight of tears rolling down my face. I looked at Sarah and was ashamed of myself.

“What’s wrong?” she asked. I looked at her for a minute and saw her eyes in a far off place. They looked blurred, as if the focus in her lens was a few hundred yards behind me. If she was paying attention, she didn’t want to be there.

“You know,” I whispered. “You know what’s wrong. You have to.” I looked away, and she waited a few seconds to think about it. The flow of salt down my cheeks increased, and I turned my gaze back to Sarah. More time passed. With each second came a few more tears. I felt like I was submerged in a pool of my own urine with the sudden desire to urinate. I didn’t want to be with Sarah, and the fact that we weren’t together wasn’t what bothered me. What bothered me was she didn’t want to be with me. I cried and cried because I couldn’t even be with a girl I had no desire to be with.

On the way to drop Toni off, we stop to get drinks at a restaurant bar in her hometown. We are sitting at the bar and Toni orders a third round of Long Island Ice Teas. I’m open with her because I have to be, but it has nothing to do with the alcohol. If I’m going to be living with this girl, I’m going to have to let her know everything that is wrong with me, so she can avoid making her mistakes, and I can avoid making mine. I talk about my depression, my failure with girls, and she talks about her boyfriend, her family problems, and about how much she’s looking forward to the future. She doesn’t believe me when I tell her I’ve never kissed a girl, and I don’t believe her when she tells me that she didn’t receive male attention in high school,

before she bulldozed through dozens of men like pebbles in a quarry in search of self-esteem. I tell her I don't know why girls don't like me, or why they don't want to be with me. They just don't. "I think you're awesome," she says, "I don't get it."

"I don't get it either," I say, "I guess that's the problem." Maybe women always rejected me because of my weight. I was obese for most of my life. I've lost a lot of weight, and Toni seems to be into me. When she says she thinks I'm awesome, I believe her. I couldn't say that about anyone else.

When I was obese, my identity was always broken down into its basic parts: the skin, the flesh, the bones. I was nothing but a byproduct of a product. It was like that each day. Waking up with three hundred and thirty pounds strapped to your bones is a lot like paralysis. Move this arm, move this leg, breathe in this air; it all seems impossible. You exist at the center of a black hole, constantly being crushed by its gravity. The intensity of every feeling is increased, as if each pound adds a thousand layers of cells, each capable of registering nothing but pain, insecurity, and regret. I knew I wasn't living a healthy lifestyle, but I didn't mind the thought of dying from heart failure.

I was obese when I met Sarah. I knew she didn't want to be with me. She dated fit, skinny guys. Countless other girls failed to leave their names or personalities in my memory. I never had anything to say, so even if I was listening and they were talking, they were speaking to themselves. I was overweight when I received the same repetitive rejection from every girl I ever asked out, never really sure why I was asking them out to begin with, just sure that I didn't want to be alone. It's not surprising that I thought there was a correlation between my weight and my celibacy. But I started to lose weight, and my perspective was changing.

Tony asks, "Have you ever tried to kill yourself?" I'm caught off guard, but I'm not surprised by her boldness. Toni doesn't run around an idea, however controversial, ridiculous, goofy, or personal it may be. I found out at the barbeque, if we were going to be friends, she would know everything about me. Either that or I'd have to make up lies.

"Yes," I say. "I thought I told you that already?"

“Yeah, I thought you did too. Sorry, that’s kind of a big thing to forget,” she says. She takes a sip of her drink and her short bangs fall over her glasses and hide her brown eyes.

We talk about our individual experiences with suicide for a while, about both of our suicide attempts, and then she asks me if I understand what she went through. I tell her I don’t understand; I couldn’t possibly understand, because our problems are so different. I tell her she doesn’t know what it is like to be alone, to never be wanted, to never feel desired.

“You are wanted,” she says. “I genuinely want you as my friend.”

“It’s not the same,” I say. “You know what I mean.” I order us another round of drinks and cautiously eye the fifty in my wallet, hoping it is enough to cover the bill. “It’s the same for you too, though. I’ve never had serious family problems. Our lives are too different to compare.”

Then she asks me, “But you understand the feeling of wanting to die?” I tell her I do. The feeling. I understand it perfectly.

A few weeks after I broke down at J.D.’s, Sarah had a boyfriend. His name was Brian. He wore baggy jeans that sagged around his thighs, revealing his boxers, and he wore an oversized hat and a polo shirt almost every day. I could have fit into his clothes, even though I weighed at least a hundred and fifty pounds more than he did. I despised him immediately.

Three or four nights a week he would sleep at the apartment. Sometimes I woke up to the sound of her shower running. I knew they were in there together, doing something. She wouldn’t stop laughing. Why would she be giggling in the shower? Because she’s a whore, maybe? Sarah’s alarm clock in her bedroom connected to the shower was buzzing. It wouldn’t stop. The pressure was building in my mind, and—like the alarm clock—there was no one in the bedroom to reset it; Brian had to be in the shower with her. I couldn’t get the image of them naked and intertwined out of my head; his arms wrapped around her warm flesh and his chest pressed against hers tightly, their mouths opening and closing over each other, like the kitchen cabinets constantly slamming against their frames when I tried to drown out the sound of the water pouring over their skin. I would never see or feel what they did then, but I had to imagine, because I couldn’t control the thoughts bursting through the seams of my skull, begging me to do anything to make the pressure go away, however violent, or permanent, that action may

have been. She's been a whore this entire time. She just didn't tell me. Maybe there are millions of fish in the sea, but they weren't swimming my way. They were too busy fucking other fish.

I tell Toni, "I never wanted to die. I don't think anyone ever does."

Suicide is never about a want; it is about a need. I tell her that, and she nods. She understands that there are no immunizations for suicide. It is a disease; as violent and jarring as the problems that lead to it.

We continue the conversation and move past the seriousness to save ourselves from crying, and start to act like crazy people in the bar. We are threatening to kill ourselves, to no one in particular. We say we are going to run into the street and let the cars run us down, that I'm going to kill myself with the spoon in my hand, but we are laughing too hard and no one in the bar notices, even as alcohol drips down my nose.

"Let's get out of here," she says, "before they come to haul us away." I see Toni's teeth through her smile, and they reflect all the light I need in the dimly lit bar.

Later in the night, Toni and I walk across the street to a local gas station and buy a pack of cigarettes. We chain smoke the entire pack in front of the store. We are facing the highway. The entire scene, even in the stupor of a thick alcohol high, is surreal. The cars move passed us quickly, and the warm summer air ignites my skin into millions of tiny fireflies as chills run up and down my spine on repeat. I am reminded the night is ending, and my mind drifts.

I think about senior prom. I was too shy and never asked anyone to go. I think about how I don't know how to dance and how there was never a reason to learn, but that maybe that would change, someday, in the near future. Toni passes her cigarette to me so that I can ignite the fresh one I am holding in my hand, and then I hand hers back into the space between her index finger and thumb. She says she thinks we were going to become best friends and that she can't wait to move into our apartment. I agree. This semester is going to be great. This semester things are going to be different. She puts her cigarette on the ground and stomps it out under her shoe. She looks at me and says, "Don't get a crush on me."

A few weeks after Brian started dating Sarah, I was in the bathroom, grasping the counters of the sink to keep myself from falling and staring at two unopened bottles of Advil. I opened one of the containers and tossed two pills into the back of my throat. They rolled around, trying to stay on the surface of my tongue, but I forced them into my stomach with a large gulp of dirty tap water. Then I took two more, but I stopped after that. I tried overdosing before. It didn't work. And it was painful. I assumed it would be painless the first time. I mean, they were painkillers. But it wasn't. It's a pain I could never describe, and I knew I couldn't do that again.

I drove to Trump Marina and walked around the casino floor, watching the nervousness of some of the people as they played blackjack, poker, roulette, and other popular casino games. They were playing a losing game; everyone in the casino was playing a losing game, and they knew it, but they continued to play. They threw down hundreds of chips that represented thousands of dollars and countless hours of hard work; chips that represented something deeper. Defeat. Hopelessness. Lost time. They were playing a losing game. It seemed foolish.

I returned to my car on the fifth floor of the parking garage and stared out over the edge and towards the pavement below. I stood there, leaning against the concrete, looking towards the pavement until it became hazy, wondering why so many people would play a losing game.

Before I went to Trump Marina, but after I snapped shut the bottle of Advil, I searched the internet for the most effective and pain-free ways to end a life. How not to traumatize your loved ones. How to find an excuse for your excuses. Morbid how-to guides for the clinically depressed looking for a one-way ticket into the afterlife. You'd be amazed about how much advice you can find about killing yourself on the internet. You'll find you have lots of supporters. But staring down, towards the pavement a few stories below me, I knew I wouldn't do it. And it had nothing to do with my hopes for a Hollywood ending. I just couldn't force my leg over that first step. I wanted to be with Sarah, and then I didn't. Then I wanted to be with anybody. I wanted to meet a girl, to make out with a bunch of random girls, maybe even sleep with a few of them, but I didn't want any of them to be Sarah. Maybe then, I could have saved our friendship. Maybe then the pavement below wouldn't have seemed so appealing.

Toni says it again. She says, “Don’t get a crush on me,” because I don’t respond when she says it the first time. I am flooded with thoughts of rejection. When I realize she isn’t joking, I look away and hide my eyes. I round my shoulders, trying to protect my face from her breath. “I have a boyfriend. The boyfriend I am probably going to marry,” she says, and I nod my head.

A few minutes pass and we remain relatively quiet. I rise from the curb I am sitting on and reach for her hand to lift her off of the pavement. I feel the weight of her small frame dragging me somewhere far away from our conversation. I am talking, but I don’t know what I am saying, and I can’t hear her either. Her hand is soft, but there is nothing there but empty flesh. But still, when I let go, I long for the opportunity to touch her again.

We walk back to my car across the street, and I’m thinking of the threat we made earlier in the night—telling the patrons of the bar that we were going to jump into the bumpers of the oncoming cars on the highway. The air is as still as the inanimate objects it surrounds; as still as the voices of hope and desire in my head. I tell Toni I am sober enough to drive. She throws her arm around my shoulder and when we arrive at my car, she pushes me off to the driver side and herself towards the passenger door. I get in and drive her home, but the trees are doubled in numbers and the lights from the businesses on the highway are divided and reflected into abstraction. I know this was a bad idea.

“That was fun. This night feels like one of those nostalgic moments we will remember forever,” she says, and I wonder how long forever will be.

“Yeah, you’re right. I had a good time,” I say, and my focus returns to the road.

When I drop her off, I get out of my car and she gives me a hug. The heat of her body translates lust and desire into my mind, and I try to keep my attention away from the fake dog and the smell that compliments it. Her hair and the skin of her ear brushes my cheek as she pulls her head away from my shoulder, and I realize that this is the first time a girl I truly wanted to be with has touched my skin, so directly, so close to where I want it to be. “Be careful on the ride home,” she says, “and

text me when you get there?” I tell her I am fine. I am sober. But I’m not. I become more intoxicated with each touch of her skin. I don’t think I’ve ever been more drunk.

She looks at me and changes her mind when she is about to turn towards home. “We feeling good—happy?” she asks, referring to our conversation about depression earlier in the evening. She warned me not to cry in the bar. She said if I cried, she would too, and that she would hit me if I did. I think she must now notice how distant I’ve been.

“Yeah, of course. It was a great night,” I say, monotone. “I’m sure we’ll have more like this. I can’t wait.” I fake a smile and she smiles back, says goodnight, goes inside, and I hear the door lock shut.

Don’t get a crush on me. She is right; there is something that shouldn’t have developed. She has a boyfriend. We are going to be living together. She is out of my league. Don’t get a crush on me. Something in my head says that maybe this time it will be different. I am losing weight. By the end of our lease, after all my hard work, I’ll be thin. Then maybe a girl like that will want to be with me. Don’t get a crush on me. Why? Why the fuck not? Why am I not allowed to fall in love and be loved in return? Don’t get a crush on me. Because we will be living together, and I can’t let things happen on repeat. I have to get over it and add one more girl to list of girls who don’t want to be with me. Don’t get a crush on me. Losing weight isn’t changing anything. Toni isn’t changing anything. If she won’t change things, who will?

Live or die. The choice is simple when you’re happy. But you can only live life in the in-between for so long. At least the gamblers at the casino had made a clear-cut decision. Maybe they were living with hope in the pursuit of random chance, but they were doing something. It was more than just dumb luck, because they had to be there, physically, and they had to act for there to be any opportunity for reward. They may not always win, but it would have been more foolish if they threw in all their chips and walked away before the cards were turned, or if they wanted to play but never played at all and went home wondering “what if?” They drove there, they walked to the table, and they tossed their bets into the pot. It’s a lot of effort, but everyone gets lucky at least sometimes. And even the losers usually walk away with a smile on their faces and their heads held high when they know they played every hand right, and that they played with a positive outcome in mind.

When I get home after dropping Toni off, I walk down my street, placing my feet in front of each other until I reach Salem Hill, walking in the wrong direction, stumbling but never falling, about three miles away from my house. I am sober by the time I arrive. And I have arrived wherever I'm going. I could keep walking, but it would just take me further away.

I sit down in front of a church on Salem Hill next to a pile of wet tiny rocks that must have been cleaned by the sprinklers watering the grass and flowers shortly before I arrived. I don't care that my pants become soaked. I'm not going to stand any longer. Don't get a crush on me. I pick up one of the rocks that is shaped like a tootsie roll with abnormally smooth edges and toss it across the pavement of the street in front of me as if it is water, hoping to see the stone skip. I hear the rock ricocheting off of the dense dark tar of the street and think of lakes and of the ripples I could have been creating.

I continue to throw rocks into the dead street until my arm hurts and the urge to go to the bathroom overtakes my desire to remain seated. I walk behind the church and find a tree. I think about what Toni had said. Don't get a crush on me. In my mind, they were never crushes, but that's how she interpreted my relationship with Sarah. That's how Sarah interpreted it too. Toni's afraid that will happen with her. I don't want to fall in love with someone that doesn't love me. Not again. I want to be in control. I want to make a decision and start walking towards it, until it's finally within my reach. I'm tired of sitting down. I'm tired of standing up. I just want to go home and get a good night sleep.

On my way back to my perch to grab the bottle of water I brought, I notice all the rocks I threw into the intersection from the light the street posts scatter below. The intersection is usually crowded during the day. I wonder if any drivers will notice what I have created; a field full of harmless land mines.

I start towards home, placing my feet in front of each other like I have never done it before. Walking is much simpler when you aren't thinking about it. But I want to be home. I need to be home. I want to wrap my wet flesh under warm blankets and breathe in the dry air of a home where the humidity has been removed. There, I can sleep, and then a new day will begin. I know, eventually, I'll get there, but only by putting one foot in front of the other.