

Coming Around

Ryan Hallagan

I was doing seventy in a twenty-five zone, my head uncoiling more and more the faster I drifted around each bend. *Just get there as soon as possible* I told myself. It felt good to have such a simple focus. I was so into that it took me a minute to realize that I had missed Lindsay's place a block and a half ago, so I pumped the breaks and looped back around to her building.

I snatched the bottle of wine from the passenger seat and she buzzed me on in. I sprinted up the stairs and was standing there in her doorway in no time.

"Hey," Lindsay said as she opened up. She had on khaki shorts that showed every inch of her long smooth legs and her wavy brown hair showed signs of a recent quick brushing.

I stretched out the bottle of wine in my hand.

She took it from me and peeked at the label. "Nice," she nodded approvingly. She grabbed a corkscrew from one of the kitchen drawers and told me to go sit down while she worked on popping it open.

I went over and collapsed down onto the couch and glanced up around the living room. The trashy tabloid magazines that used to cover the entire coffee table were gone and she'd replaced her old TV with a much wider one. But she still had the framed *The Velvet Underground and Nico* artwork cover I'd gotten for her while we were still together hanging on the wall.

"You didn't have to bring this you know," I heard Lindsay say from far off in the kitchen.

"Yeah," I croaked out.

She came in smiling, carefully crossing the room with two half-full wineglasses in her hands. I sat up as she handed me mine.

“Cheers,” she said and we clinked glasses. We were only supposed to sip it but I downed mine in one gulp and sighed as I fell back against the couch. Lindsay smiled and curled up next to me, her head slightly below mine, waiting to be kissed.

I obliged her. Her lips were just as soft as I’d remembered and I could taste the grapes of the vineyards again there in her mouth.

“Wow,” Lindsay smiled. “She must have really pissed you off, huh?”

“Can we please not talk about it?” I pleaded.

“Oh, Matty,” she laughed dismissively, as though I had said something silly about the stock market. She got up and went towards the kitchen. “We never were very good at talking,” she called back to me. “Just always okay at it, huh?”

I didn’t say anything; just laid there on the couch, hoping to forget all that had happened less than two hours ago.

“Yeah,” she answered herself as she returned with the bottle and poured me another glass. “But we always had other things,” she giggled as she handed it to me.

I sucked that one down too and set it back down on the table.

“We still *have* other things.” She wrapped her legs around me and brought us crashing down against the couch’s cushions.

I hopped in my truck early in the morning while the sun still had a reddish-orange to it. It was Saturday so I didn’t have to go into the office but I needed a shower and some fresh clothes anyway, so I headed back to the apartment Shannon and I shared. I

figured some of her girlfriends would have taken her out garage sailing to get her mind off things, so it seemed like a pretty good time to go over there and grab some stuff for the next couple weeks.

I opened the front door and saw her wrapped in a blanket on the couch. She got up as I came in, her hair a tangled mess and wearing her old sweats from college.

“Look, I’ve just gotta grab some clothes.” I told her. “Then I’ll go. Danny said I could stay at his place.”

She charged at me as though she were a bull and I were a matador with a red cape in my hands.

“Shannon, I’ll be real quick. I promise,” I pleaded with her as she came at me. She didn’t seem to be stopping though, so I mentally prepared myself to be struck repeatedly.

Rather than smack me though, she threw herself at me and squeezed me in a tight embrace. It surprised me for a number of reasons, but chief among them was the fact that Shannon had never been one for a lot of touching and it hardly seemed the time to start now. “Thank God you’re home,” she said as she laid her head against my chest.

“Huh?”

“I’m sorry,” she cried. “I shouldn’t have done that. I’ve been up all night worrying.”

Her face certainly looked like it. The fresh set of tears that she had now seemed to be following the trail her tears from last night had left.

“I... I thought you meant it,” I fought to shake out.

She looked up at me. “No, no. Baby, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. See,” she pointed towards the ring on her finger. “I’ve got it back on. See?”

I hung my head. “I thought you really meant it,” I repeated.

She stared into my eyes and at that moment she knew. Then the real waterworks started gushing out and she started flailing at me, all the while screaming about what an asshole I was and how she should have never trusted me again and how this time she really meant it when she said we were through for good. She even threw the ring at my head for good measure. It missed, but it still hurt just the same.

I tore out of the congested part of town, twisted around some back roads, and soon was out on the one-lane road that led through the valley. Staring out the window, I could see a herd of cattle grazing the last patches of grass near the edge of a barbed wire fence. Further down, there was a small set of horses clomping along lazily through the fields, occasionally nibbling each other as they went. The land ahead stretched out for miles and miles with nothing but the far off hills in the distance to look at. They seemed to soar higher and higher as I went along and it was easy to forget that they weren’t really climbing at all and that I was actually slowly plummeting further and further downward as I sped down the road. The road stopped dipping after about a half-hour and I began to get anxious waiting for the small clearing that I knew lay shortly ahead to appear. It finally came into view and I pulled off to the side of the road.

I got out and walked over to the edge and peeked out at the acres upon acres of forest that lay below. There were coast redwoods and tanoaks mostly, with the only sound there coming from some woodpeckers that were still chomping away at the trees

this late in the morning. Through it all, I could just make out the quiet cabin at the bottom. It looked so small it reminded me of a playhouse my sister had when we were kids. The cabin had been on the market for over a year now and I checked the paper every week to make sure it was still listed. I knew it was a long shot and all, but if it just held a couple more years, I'd be able to make an offer.

I stood looking out at everything for a good fifteen minutes before hopping back into my truck and heading back into town. I called Danny when I got there and he told me I could crash at his place for awhile.

“She’ll come around, Matt,” Danny said later that night as we collapsed into a booth, our tray topped with salsa and burritos. We had spent most of the night knocking back pitchers at our watering hole and skipped out just before closing time to beat the swaying stampede on over here.

I tore into my carnitas burrito and looked at them standing there in line. Only a few had to squint up at the menu above the counter. The rest had it memorized so they kept up their conversations from the bar. I could hear one guy above the din, bitching to his buddies about a cutie who he had grinding up on him the whole night. Apparently, she had gone to the bar for one last drink and ended up splitting with a guy in a raised-up Ford.

It seemed not much had changed in the eight months since I'd last come around.

There were a few faces that I didn't recognize though. They weren't anything special, a couple of guys with leather jackets trying to look tough, but they weren't from

around here so they had a couple girls clamoring all over them. I wondered if they had someone waiting for them back where they lived. They didn't seem the type to care.

“Besides,” Danny shrugged between mouthfuls. “She forgave you once before.”

I glanced over at the booth across the way. There were five of them crowded around the table, but it may as well have just been the two of them sitting together on the end.

She sure was something, her thick black hair dangling down on one side and a smile extending on up to her eyes; brown with a fleck of honey to them. He had an easy laugh and seemed to know just how lucky he was to have her sitting there beside him. From the looks of things they weren't a couple just yet, but they each seemed to be warming to the idea of carving out a life together. They just might make it, I thought. She seemed smart enough to say she was sorry for flinging the ring he had given across the room and for that crack about the quiet cabin being nothing but a pipe dream, before he slammed the front door behind him. And he didn't look dumb enough to show up at an old flame's place with a bottle of wine later that night, before she got around to apologizing. And together, they seemed to have the sense to not let something stupid, like the proper way to marinate the chicken they were having for dinner, boil over into an argument that eventually undid four years spent together.

“Yeah,” I said. “Once.”