2004 First Place Personal Narrative

Goodbye Doesn’t Suck

He didn’t ask this time if I minded. He just reached into the front pocket of his sweatshirt and pulled one out. It was dark blue—the sweatshirt, not the cigarette—but so was everything else. The twilight had settled into a deep navy edging toward black, throwing tinted shadows on everything in the backyard. The stars had chosen to hide in the safety of the trees, and we sat somewhere below them, talking. I saw them now and again, sharing winks and secrets with the fountain in the corner of the garden. As I listened I took in what colors were left of the evening: the back door was still red, the house was still a paler blue than the air, and his eyes were still brown. I knew that would never change.

He pretended to be sly about leaning down and slipping it in his mouth. His eyes darted back and forth in his pale face.

“How did that get there?” he muttered, looking around, pulling out his lighter. I had to laugh. I always had to laugh.

I really didn’t mind—I’d only seen him smoke once before, and I liked to watch his hands. I liked the way the cigarette sat between his knuckles when he held his hands together. I liked the way his long fingers fiddled with it as he talked and it gradually disappeared.

“I stole my violin back from my parents a few months ago. They still haven’t noticed.”

“They haven’t noticed?”

“There’s my parents for you.” He inhaled again. His parents had kicked him out of the house when he failed to graduate from high school, and they hadn’t let him take his violin with him. It was foreign, and valuable, and they claimed that it didn’t belong to him, since they had paid for it. It was really because they were afraid he’d sell it for drug money. That had always made me wonder if they knew him at all.

“I’ve actually practiced it too,” he added, “but I get to about forty-five minutes and have to put it down.”
“Why?”

“I don’t know. It’s just so much a part of my past, you know?”

I knew. I knew that right then I wanted that beautiful German violin to appear in his hands, and to hear him play Schindler’s List again, just for me, just one more time. That was his famous solo, the one he’d claimed after taking over as concertmaster when he was a sophomore. That was the melody that always moved my eyes, the one that sent my gaze across the inner circle of the orchestra to find his own turned to me. That was where it all started: in orchestra, in April, when I was fourteen. I was a freshman then, second chair cellist, and he was amazing and hilarious and brilliant.

“It was too much of a label for me in high school,” he said.

“What do you mean?” I asked. I couldn’t see what was wrong with being known as a violinist.

“I mean people would know absolutely nothing else about me, or they would know about some things but they’d cover it all up with the fact that I could play the violin. ‘Man, that Dan Lambert, he’s messed up...’”

“But he can play the violin.”

“Yeah. They used it to define me. And that pissed me off. You know, there at the end it was the only class I cared about. Orchestra was the one class I wouldn’t skip. I failed everything else, but you know what I got in orchestra?” He pointed as if the grade were sitting in front of him. “An A plus.”

Suddenly I felt guilty, not only for missing orchestra his senior year to be in choir, but because for an instant I wondered if I had loved him just because of the way he played the violin. No, that couldn’t have been the only reason, I thought. Right? I wondered. But really, you don’t cry because of a violin. You cry because of the music and the person whose hand is spidering across the fingerboard. Besides, he was also the one who could make me laugh more than anyone else in the world. He would go out of his way, in orchestra and in French, to make comments and jokes that everyone laughed at, but I knew they were meant for me. He would do almost anything to make me laugh. It was worth it, to him.

I was staring at his hands again. I guess it was harder for me to look him in the eyes. I was still shy, even three years later, after everything that had happened. That’s why it had taken me weeks to gather enough courage just to call him. In the end, I did it because I couldn’t stand the thought of not seeing him again,
knowing it would very likely be the last time. It was strange to think that what had started more than three years before might finally find an ending.

“You know,” he said, “if someone had told me, then, that I would be having this conversation with you—that I would even be in contact with you...” He shook his head, and I watched the remains of the cigarette sit quietly between his fingers. I think we were both remembering how badly things had gone down, and how fast. Religion, drugs, parents—neither of us had been willing to cross those bridges. Now I could see him starting to form that smile that I can’t call anything but his; that sly, half-imp snicker that somehow manages to be sincere. “I probably would’ve called them something rather uncomplimentary and told them to screw off,” he decided.

I smiled, but he probably couldn’t see it. The stars seemed to be moving farther away and they were taking the rest of the colors with them. They kept circling as we talked, carefully eavesdropping to see if this could really be the end. They were the only ones who knew what wasn’t being said.

“I think I can tell you that I’ve fantasized about you turning rebel,” he told me. I had to laugh. “I imagined you showing up one day on a motorcycle, all in leather with a case of beer. But that’s probably about as likely as me showing up in Utah with a suit and a little blue book. But hey, who knows?”

_I can only wish_, I thought, but I probably laughed. I stared at his hands as they moved, toying with what was left of his cigarette. To his credit, he only had one the whole evening. Now he was sitting the way he usually did when he meant what he was saying, with his forearms on his knees and his hands curled around each other. I waited, knowing he would say something else.

“To fall in love with someone for the first time and then just break it off, for all the right reasons...That was one of the most mature... and painful decisions...”

He said it so casually, and I was surprised to find myself still smiling. I couldn’t decide if I was surprised at the direct reference, or if I’d been expecting it. I did notice, though, how easy it was to talk about. Not that I was doing the talking.

_It was your decision_, I thought through the smile. _Not mine. I always remember_ that part...
I remembered sitting on my parents’ bed, watching myself cry and talking to myself in the mirror. I remembered that my sister made spaghetti that night, and that I sat in my usual chair at the head of the table and said nothing. I remembered no one noticing that I hardly ate. I remembered knowing that he would be conquering the world, because he’d said it was the only thing that took his mind away from me. I remembered his questions, and how he’d lied about Tool, and that the Great Schism was in 1054. I remembered talking about sheep.

I remembered the things he’d said to me: Sometimes when I play, I watch you. You’re a beautiful person, inside and out. Religion is an accessory. You keep trying to get in the way. I smoke marijuana. After you, it was amphetamines. I got my revenge. Do you mind?

They had stung through my mind so many times they seemed to have a permanent order and connection. None of it hurt anymore, but I still remembered. Maybe time doesn’t really heal things. Maybe it just makes them numb.

I remembered everything, kept smiling, and said nothing. I just listened.

“You know, right now goodbye doesn’t suck.”

I felt a faint shock, but kept the smile.

He was right.

It was as if something had fallen as he spoke—but no, not fallen. Nothing crashed, nothing shook, nothing broke. But something opened. It had never before occurred to me that this process wouldn’t be painful, or that completely letting him go would be okay. And yet it was.

Maybe it was helped by the fact that I was going to college across the country and my family was moving in two days. Maybe it was made easier knowing we might never see each other again, and that we had each found someone else to love. Or maybe it was just because it had finally been long enough.

I almost couldn’t believe it, but I knew he was right.

“Are you happy?” he asked. He’s always asked me that, and he knows I can’t lie to him. But somehow the answer is always the same:

“I am.”
We hugged, and he almost fell over.

“You caught me off balance,” he said as I tried my best not to laugh. Then he disappeared, because that’s the only way he can leave. It was like the day he walked me home and couldn’t just walk out the door like a normal person. Oh no. He had to stick his head out, look both ways, and sprint off through the neighbors’ backyards as if he were being chased. Then suddenly he darted behind a house and continued on his way.

From where we stood now, in the backyard, he could’ve walked back through the house, or even down the driveway to the street, but that’s not how he does things. So he went to the fence, looked around, slipped over into the neighbor’s yard, and disappeared from my life into the deep blue cloak of night.