

I Left My Phone

by Samantha Stagg

I'd just climbed the porch steps, hit the bill of my cap on the rotting door frame, and entered the cloud of beer and Hi-C fumes that pickled the furniture when Faith's hand shot out of the throng and ripped me aside.

"You haven't left yet?" She's out of breath and her cheeks are red, and she spits the words at me the way she did every time we'd interacted since the breakup. It's really only a slight change in tone from the one she used when we were together.

"I think I left my phone somewhere in here," I say.

"Where?"

"I don't know, somewhere in here."

"Well get it and get out," she says.

"Oh, is *he* here?" I don't think I'd ever actually used her new boyfriend's name before—"he" got the point across well enough.

"Yes, he's here, he just got here." She looks to the side like he might appear at her shoulder. "But what are you doing here? After you get your degree, you're supposed to leave college, believe it or not."

"Real nice, Faith."

"Just get your phone and go."

She pushes me into the house and when I look back, she's retreating through the jungle of sweaty bodies in the direction of her friends.

Vibrating from the earthquake of the sound system, I stare into the first party of the year. Not much has changed in the 20 minutes it took to realize I'd left my phone. Lamps still cast unearthly shades of pink and green onto faces I know and faces I don't, as they laugh and sway by the banister, along the walls, outside the bathroom. The air is still humid from sweat vaporizing in the heat of friction. Drunk heaps of students still annex the couches to make out or gaze at their phones, and those dancing in the living-room still collide at the shoulder and hit each other's backs as they move closer and closer to the center, a mass perpetually folding in on itself. And yet, it's a little different, a little drunker. While I had fit in 20 minutes ago, I get the feeling I already don't anymore.

Bumping into people and ill-placed end tables, I slide the lock on my emergency iPod, circa 2012, and enter the uninspired 1111 password. Find My iPhone says my phone is somewhere in the house, but I can't tell which floor the little dot is on, and I can't narrow it down because I had been everywhere. I tug at the bottom of my shirt to get it to sit right—a Keep Calm tee that's just small enough to make me look fit—and as an arbitrary guess, I head for the staircase. Everyone around me is moving with sloppy speed, but I take the stairs slowly, like the villain at the end of a movie.

I couldn't care less if Faith had a new boyfriend, even though everyone thinks I should. A summer isn't supposed to be enough time to get over the fact that a relationship of two years was brought down in a single day. I'm supposed to want to march up to the new boyfriend and ruin

their relationship with the things he doesn't know. But the difference is that I've graduated now, I've risen above. And maybe I would care if I thought their love story was written in the stars, but since *he* will be packing up his cello and transferring to Oberlin next semester, I don't see how it matters.

The upstairs is dense with smoke, smoke so thick and quieting it dampens the shouts and EDM coming up from the staircase. On sofas ensconced along walls and in corners, couples act freely, hidden by the safety of poor lighting. I go to where I had been about an hour prior—laying on a beanbag on the far wall with a junior named Angela, as she chattered about how I must be so thrilled to have finally graduated. Angela was just marking time on that beanbag. Clinking her beer bottle against her thumb ring, she had asked what my life plans were, etc., and when that got boring she asked what I was still doing at parties if I no longer go here.

I lift the sleeve of the jacket now occupying the beanbag, but there's no phone under it. As I turn back, I have to sidestep as two girls, leaning heavily on one another, brush past me and collapse on the beanbag in a fit of senseless laughter. They huddle close and snicker with the energy that only freshmen have—a little drunker than they planned, but so exhilarated by their first house party that nervous energy manifests as hyper self-assurance.

"Hey you, hat guy" one of them calls to me. The other giggles and hiccups, her glossy, vacant eyes trained in my direction. "Toss me those paper towels?"

This is their first whisper of college; there will be many nights like this one. They remind me of my newborn nephew: their unfocused eyes do not see that time is on their side.

I grab the roll off a high-top table and hand them over. Girl 1 stuffs a few under her arms, and uses another to dab sloppily at the eyes of her mate. "Your mascara is on your eyelid," she says, to which the other bursts out laughing again. Gazing at them, my composure starts to feel criminal. I creep back toward the stairs, leaving them on their dimly lit island of two.

Coming down the steps, I catch a glimpse of Faith. The music changes from bewildering techno to early 2000s hits, and Faith is off to the side laughing with her group and throwing her arms around *him*. If this was a debutante ball, and I was coming down the steps to be received by society, this would be the moment when I first behold my true love in the crowd. But this tangled mess of adult children is not high society, and no one notices my coming down the steps except the couple I somewhat step on, and Faith is too cold to be my true love. True loves don't usually tell you they preferred the way you looked before every time you get a haircut or shave. True loves don't shoot you a look like you're doing something wrong when you laugh loudly in a group, or wave you away if you come up while they're talking to a friend.

Faith doesn't know he's transferring to Oberlin next semester. I only found out myself because I worked in the registrar's office last spring and saw the paperwork. *Oh, Faith's new friend is transferring*, I thought. *Maybe they'll stay in touch*. Some faint part of my brain set a reminder to introduce myself to him before he left, but that reminder promptly dimmed and vanished. His transfer wasn't important enough to mention to Faith at the time, so I forgot about it. That is, until the day she came back to our apartment dressed in his hoodie, smelling strongly of boy, fidgeting like she knew she'd done something wrong. Then I remembered, since Oberlin was the only thing I knew about him. But it didn't seem like the most important thing to say in that moment.

I stop at the landing and glance around. It's a large landing, large enough to be a mezzanine, and it's equipped with two broken chairs, a fraying couch, and a standing speaker that has been converted into a drink stand. I remember joining a side party on this landing an hour or so ago, drinking some sort of sweet cocktail in a solo cup as I attempted to pop a squat on one of the broken chairs. The side party had been talking quietly, but the sound of a cracking chair leg made them stop.

"Hey Sarah!" I had said. "Hey Jason, hey Marcus! What's up guys?"

"Um," said Sarah. "We're actually in the middle of something. Good to see you, though."

"How's it going?" I asked.

Sarah glanced back at her friends, who shifted slightly before saying, "Well how are you, Ted?"

"I graduated, you know. Poly Sci. These days, that's really all anyone should be majoring in."

"Okay Ted," Sarah said.

Now, only two people remain on the landing, and they're disregarding all of the furniture and making out on the floor. Go figure. I step gingerly over them as I look for my phone, muttering "sorry" and pretending I can't hear their noises, but when they don't get out of the way I say "excuse me" and stand there until they stop and shove over.

"The hell, man," says the guy. "Read the room."

"Is there a phone under you?" I ask.

Back on the stairs and still phoneless, I lean on the railing. I'm getting soberer by the second, and it's exhausting always being the one to sidestep others as they plow forth with the confidence of someone who will never die. I look down at my shirt, which I now think might not have been the right choice. It's a little too tight, and I decide it's not the kind of tight that shows off your body but rather the kind that makes parts of you bulge out like the marble in those nylon fiber fidget toys.

I look down at the top of a head propped against the banister below and realize it's Joe Ryder with some buddies. We lived in the same building my Sophomore—his Freshmen—year, and he hung on my every word since I taught him where all the good parties were and how to jiggle the Cocoa Puffs machine when it seemed like it was out. Last semester, we reconnected in professor Helmen's Advanced Stats class. Almost immediately, he began coming to me for advice about this professor or that, this girl or that. After every Friday lecture he asked me which party I'd go to that weekend, and no matter how smashed he was, he never failed to make his way to there and find me in the crowd.

Now, Joe Ryder polishes off his can of Natty Light to the cheers of friends. He crushes the can and slams it on the ground.

"Hey Ryder!" I call.

Ryder looks around like maybe God has spoken, then cranes his neck up and sees me.

"Oh, hey Ted!" he says. "Long time no see! What's up man?"

"Not much, how are things? You managing without me?"

"Uh," he says. "Well classes aren't as bad as Helmen. But I'm finishing up my Math minor, so I'm stuck with Vector Spaces, and..." He trails off, despite the concerted effort of his beer-stained brain. His buddies laugh. "I dunno man, it's all good. What classes are you in?"

"Oh I'm not..."

"Wait, you graduated, didn't you?"

"Yeah."

"Congrats," says Ryder. "But then, what are you doing here? Aren't you doing other stuff now?"

"It's still in the works," I say. I think about the summer I just spent making 3,600 cold calls for Representative Sailing's campaign, and how on the last day of that gruelling summer they gave me a button, the same button they had been passing out door to door.

"Well uh, good luck Ted," Ryder says, though his attention has maxed out. He notices my shirt. "Keep calm, right?" More laughter from the friends.

I pull at my shirt, but I can't get it to lay right. Why is Ryder existing more easily than me? He seems like the head of his party—though they present as an uncoordinated herd of haphazard frat boys, all seven of Ryder's buddies are positioned more or less toward him.

One of them says "beer die!" and they barrel toward the back of the house like they're responding to a transmission from the mothership. The wake of their sudden absence feels vast, despite the sheer volume of people at this party.

My shirt is riding up again. I tug it back down.

I met *him* once, right after commencement this past spring. It was a blinding day out on the main lawn, and in the shadows of the trees, wispy bugs flitted around like particles of dust. The crowds were thinning as parents escorted their graduates off the lawn, off to try that one sushi place they'd been hearing about for four years. My own family was waiting for me at the edge of the lawn, mom tapping my grad cap against her leg as dad perused the graduation pamphlet like he might order something off it.

He was standing at the dessert table in the shade of a maple, tucking a caramel brownie into a napkin with plastic tongs. I knew it was him because his face was a three 3D approximation of what I'd seen in all of Faith's new Facebook photos. But his hair was annoyingly thicker than I'd estimated, and the ridge on his nose didn't stick out as much in real life as it did in pictures. He had all the nondescript qualities of a model student—the kind of guy whose parents would insist on celebration pie after the sushi place, if only he were graduating. I came up behind him as he broke a chunk off his brownie.

"Are they good?" I said.

"Oh! You're uh, you're Ted, right?" He stumbled through it, getting his bearings. I had nailed the element of surprise.

"Yeah, Ted," I said.

"Hey, nice to meet you, I'm—you uh, you just graduated, right?"

"Yeah."

"Hey man, congratulations," he said. "I wish I was in your shoes. Off to bigger things, right?"

"I'm sure," I said. "But you are too, right? Semester after next, off to Oberlin?"

He stopped picking at the brownie. "Where'd you hear that?"

"I work in the registrar. Well, worked, I guess."

He got quieter. "So the way it's working out is that I need a couple more credits here, but then I'm gone. This place is great, it's just not my scene, you know? Oberlin is smaller, and I'll do the cello. Music program there is way better."

Not his scene? No way Faith was on board with that.

"Sounds great," I said.

We stood in silence for a moment, listening to bits of conversation caught in the breeze. He pulled at the edges of his napkin and curled the shreds into a little paper ball between his fingers.

"Hey man, I'm... I'm sorry about Faith," he said, looking up from his napkin shreds to check my expression. "I know I'm probably not your favorite person."

I couldn't believe this guy, with his thick hair and regular-sized nose, pilling his napkin and eyeing me nervously as if he were meek, as if he weren't the same guy who took my girlfriend and then brought it up to my face while eating a brownie.

"Oh no," I said. "It's all cool."

"I just wanted to clear the air, before you go," he said. And with that, he also claimed the title of Bigger Man.

"The air's totally clear," I said.

"And I know she isn't the most subtle about our relationship," he said, "and I know that isn't ideal, since you guys only ended over spring break."

Wait, spring break? We were very much still together over spring break.

"As in, mid-March spring break?" I said.

"This might be weird of me to say," he said, "I'm sorry. Just know that she did take some time to process your breakup."

At first, my chest tightened as I realized Faith had lied to him, had failed to mention there was a week of overlap between him and me. With this handy oversight, Faith orchestrated her situation exactly how she wanted it, just like she always does—a fact that had chipped away at my mind for as long as I'd known her. But then I saw it, the nugget of gold that just landed in my lap.

I held the cards now.

"You're saying you got together a couple weeks after spring break, and that she and I broke up during spring break, right?" I said.

Unless *he* was simply pretending he didn't know, to make this encounter less uncomfortable. But with his unassuming, unimaginative temperament, he didn't seem like the type to go for a cheater.

"Yeah, the first week of break," he said. "Is that not—that's when you ended, right?"

I looked at his cupped hand. The pills of napkin he'd amassed were embedding themselves into the side of his brownie. His expression told me he had everything out on the table, and bearing witness to him in that moment was delicious.

"Yeah, no, that's when we ended," I said.

He looked relieved, but reassembled his composure quickly. "Listen, not everyone knows about the Oberlin thing," he said.

"Oh?"

"Well, no one knows about the Oberlin thing."

"Oh."

He ripped his napkin clean in half. "And that includes..."

Ah. Faith didn't know.

"It would only make things unnecessarily complicated," he went on. "I'm not looking to load drama onto a fling. You get it, right?"

Based on her leap out of a two-year relationship, I was pretty sure Faith wouldn't classify her new thing as a "fling." She would hate everything about this, everything he just said. I curled my fingers around my diploma, which was tucked up into the massive sleeve of my gown. I felt its weight, its smooth, padded edges. I could do so much damage here.

He closed his hand around his new dessert, brownie à la napkin. "You'll keep this between us?" he said.

"For sure man."

He nodded and wished me luck with things, then went off in the direction of friends, thick hair blowing like prairie grass, brownie fist at his side.

* * *

A senior named Mandi passes me on the stairs. She's at this party because she's at every party—aside from the few times Faith had her over, I've never seen her anywhere else but here, slurring words at some newly acquired friend, her curiously long hair dipping in her drink.

"Teduuh!" she draws my name out as if she's been looking for me everywhere, the missing puzzle piece of her night. "Hey, *graduate!*" She tilts on her axis and I catch her.

"Yes, that's me," I say.

"What are you up to?" She says. "Any big post-grad plans, are you going to save the world?"

"Well..."

"You know Chelsea, she was in your class, light brown hair? Well anyway, she's in the Peace Corps now, in Ukraine! Or it might've been Africa—one of those two. You remember Chelsea?"

"Sure, she has light brown hair."

"Yes, that's her!" She leans in with the sharp suddenness of a drunk, and her damp breath steams sour vodka into my nose. I realize whatever buzz I may have started the night with is completely gone.

"So do you have a job or somethin'?" her vodka breath asks me.

I made so many cold calls this summer that the sound of muted ringing implanted itself in my brain, and I'd hear it every night as I tried to fall asleep. During the rings, I wondered what the odds were that I'd dialed Faith's parent's house, and that Faith would pick up. At night when I heard the phantom rings, I would imagine I *had* called Faith's parent's place. Whenever Faith picked up in my mind, I would wish her good luck getting *him* to love her because I sure as hell never did.

"I'm kind of in between things," I say.

“In between graduating and...?”

I take a moment to really look at her— huge eyes waiting for a response, long hair draped over her elbows, shielding her arms from the world.

“I don’t know,” I say at last.

“Ah, just figuring yourself out,” she says. “You’ll get it. Just do some soul searching.”

“I’ll try that,” I say, and she nods like we have a new secret. She lifts herself off me, reestablishes balance, and picks her way down the stairs like someone just removed the training wheels from her legs.

I met Faith at a pre-med career fair. It made no sense for me to be there; I was about to declare political science. But I found myself at nearly every campus career event, no matter the subject, just in case I wanted to change course. At the end of an echoey hall, a girl stood with her hands on her backpack straps, scanning a tack board of research positions. Her hair, pecan brown, shrouded her backpack in militantly precise curls that reminded me of a sketch of Athena from a picture book I had in grade school. I glanced around the hallway at the students lining the halls, watched as they nodded eagerly at professors who explained Science while holding transparent cups of apple juice. They all looked like they knew who they were supposed to talk to, which pamphlets they were supposed to pick up, where they were supposed to mingle. I walked up to the girl with the mythological hair and stood by her like we were scrutinizing a museum installation.

“Do you know if any of these are good?” I asked, trying to do the cool thing, which was to not turn my head and look at her.

“Yes,” I heard her say. “By the first week of Research Fair all of Professor Caulin’s neurology positions are filled. I already got my application in, I’m just looking at backups.”

“So you’re pre-med?” I asked like an idiot.

“I’ll take a gap year to do polymer research before med school. They want experience, it’s all about experience now. My dad wants me to go to Duke, but everyone knows Wash U has a better program and gets you better placement.” She glanced my way. “Sorry, what was your question?”

“I don’t remember.”

She smiled.

A leaflet caught her eye and she plucked it from the board, folded it meticulously and tucked it into a leather portfolio in the first pocket of her backpack. As she slung the bag back onto her shoulder and pulled her hair out from under, I realized I had no idea how curls worked, how they could defy gravity and take a circuitous path down to Earth. I was spellbound by the science of her hair, its impossibility and its spirit. The world was out there for this girl—she was going to research poly-somethings and memorize anatomy in dusty libraries at Washington University and someday, her daily business was going to be permitting people to live. Someday she would decompress a collapsed lung and it would be just another Tuesday.

“I gotta go,” she said when her bag was back on and her hair set straight.

“What’s your name?”

“Faith,” she said.

“I’m Ted.”

"You seem shy." Faith smiled. "I like that."

"Thanks." I tried to sound even shyer.

"Bye, Ted!" she called as she walked back down the hall, hard oxford soles like mallets on the linoleum floor.

I tried to hold her in my eyes as long as I could, long after we said goodbye. But the image slipped further and further away, and when it was completely gone I tracked her down and asked her out so I could renew the vision.

* * *

As folks trip past me down the stairs, I do some mental calculations. It's September, meaning Faith and her new boyfriend have been together four months. Now is about the time she would be imagining the two of them walking down the aisle at the warm summer wedding of a close mutual friend. She would be thinking about how they look together—him tall and square of jaw, her with mermaid hair the color of syrup. He's set to transfer in early December, meaning they have roughly three months left on the timer. Kind of odd he calls that a "fling," but we're talking about a seven-month relationship pulled out from under her. I wonder how it'll feel. Probably only a fraction as bad as the two-year version. I wonder if he plans to break the news to her a week or two out, or if he'll just pick up one day and say *see ya*.

As the music turns lyrical, I see Faith grip the sleeve of his shirt and bring him to the center of the living room, where they dance, two heads bobbing in the crowd. He wraps her in a hug, and she smiles into his chest. Faith wants me gone from this party, gone from this town, but what she doesn't know is that I, with my newly gained freedom to travel anywhere and be anything, will probably still be here longer than that chest will.

The first time Faith brought up our hypothetical wedding, she mentioned it as if it were nothing, as if she'd been thinking about wearing her bangs down or getting takeout for dinner. We were sitting on a bench sandwiched between the highway and the Cooley's parking lot. In the first several months of our relationship, when we still found it cute to be ritualistic about our dates, we would get lunch from Cooley's every Friday to celebrate neither of us having classes that day. Cooley's sandwiches always looked a little run-down, but for two college students they got the job done. We'd go out to the bench to eat, despite its unfortunate placement, because Cooley's was dank inside and we couldn't stand to waste the late summer air.

The Friday that Faith talked weddings was the kind of overcast day where sunlight bounces off the clouds and makes everything oddly bright, though you can't locate the sun. I unwrapped my hot, oily patty melt, and spread the wax wrapper on my lap to catch the plops of Dijon aioli that squeezed out the back. Faith watched cars go by with a mild smile on her face; she was in a good mood because there was no line at Cooley's and we had gotten our order in record time.

"Can't you see us at our wedding?" she said to the cars.

I had to chew and force down my mouthful of ground beef before I could say, "Huh?"

"Can't you see us at a wedding," she said. "I think we'd be really something at a wedding, walking down the aisle."

"Are you talking about getting married?" I said to the side of her face.

"No, just like. Think how we would look at the wedding."

"So you can see us getting married?" I asked.

"No, just think how great it would look," she said. "Everyone would see us like that."

The highway produced an artificial breeze that lifted her hair lightly off her shoulders. She wasn't bringing this up to hear my opinion, she was musing out loud.

"Oh yeah, that would be nice," I said—one of the many times I would agree with her over the years, once I learned the conversation couldn't move forward until I did. I smiled to myself like she was sweet for what she said, though she hadn't so much as glanced in my direction while saying it. I smiled like that many times on that bench in the early days, though I gradually learned to distrust my smile, as I was never quite certain why it was there.

Since Cooley's was a five-minute drive in the wrong direction, I only saw it and the highway bench during those Friday lunches. I Pavlov trained myself, like a dog, to love the smell of oniony grease that said it was the weekend, to love the sound of loud trucks barreling down the roadway, and to love being with my girlfriend.

I hadn't seen Faith all summer. Before this party, the last time I saw her was a damp day in May, when I intercepted her on the way to her car. It was the day after commencement, and those students who weren't immediately heading home loitered around campus, liberated and confused by a sudden drop in responsibility. A couple blocks off campus, I hung by the mini-lot where Faith had begun parking her car after the breakup. It was the lot closer to *his* apartment on Third. The trees were denser there, and squirrels darted over knobby roots. I barely breathed as I paced by my car, kicking at the wet twigs wedged in the sidewalk cracks. Third was a horrible street. It was barely maintained by the city, and nature had let loose, ripping up the street and creeping into drains.

Faith came out of the low, brown brick apartment complex with a backpack, duffel bag and small plant. She must have been going home. She set the plant on the roof of her car and rummaged in the backpack for her keys, but stopped when she saw me.

"Ted," she said.

"How are the new digs?" I asked.

"Don't be like that," she said.

"Anyway, I was just wondering—"

"I can't believe you came all the way out here," she said.

"—Anyway," I said, "I was just wondering if maybe there's been a little confusion about our breakup, in terms of the facts."

Faith shifted her backpack to the other shoulder. "What do you mean," she said.

"It's just that I met *him* the other day—"

"You know what his name is."

"I met *him*, and we got to talking, and he seems to think that you and I separated *full weeks* before he found you. Now, why would he think that?" I asked.

Faith went back to looking for her keys. "I don't know, he doesn't have the greatest attention to detail," she said.

"I Left My Phone" by Samantha Stagg

Copyright 2021 by Samantha Stagg

Finalist story in the 2021 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest

Associated Colleges of the Midwest ACM.edu/NickAdams

Note: This story is reprinted with permission. Reproduction of this story without the express, written permission of the author is prohibited.

"Oh, detail!" I said. "Yes, what a minor detail. It seems like all the facts that incriminate *you* are 'details,' and the ones that are my fault get a fucking press conference."

"Let me know when you've tired yourself out," she said as she unlocked the door and loaded her things into the back seat.

"Faith, stop."

She turned to me, waiting.

"You lied to him. These 'details' make you a cheater."

"Maybe you're right," she said.

"Maybe?"

"But listen—he can't find out. Please," she softened as she reassessed our positions, "please don't tell him. You do your life and I do mine now. Please."

I had never in my life heard her say 'please' three times in a row. I couldn't even remember her lips forming the word once—it seemed unnatural, like trying to read words in a language you've never heard spoken.

"Why shouldn't I tell him, after what you did?"

"Because," she said. "Because at some point, you have to give me air."

"Hey, you get what's coming to you."

Faith stopped loading her things. She slumped, resting her brow on the frame of the door.

"I need air, Ted. I thought that leaving you would do it. But what, you're at my place now?"

"Oh so now I suffocated you, is that right?"

She stayed slumped over, staring at the stuff she just put in the back seat. She was excellent at playing the victim, in that moment she had the role nailed. A couple cars rolled past, slowing down for potholes and cracks left by growing roots. I wondered who was in those cars, who they were, whether they were heartbroken.

"I don't need this," she said. "I have things to do."

"Right, the things," I said. "I wouldn't want to get in the way of this precious life you're living. I forgot you're going to be the world's first doctor."

She raised her head. "You're blocking me in," she said.

* * *

Faith sees me as I near the bottom of the stairs. The look she gives me is her own unique brand of irritation, the variety she saves for moments when she hopes anger will mask her fear. She's still draped in his arms. Her look says "don't come closer," but I do. I nudge my way through the mass of dancers, who jostle me, and I take care not to lose track of Faith. *He* doesn't see me, and Faith doesn't alert him to my presence. She's holding out hope that maybe I won't make it there, that maybe someone will pull me aside or a fight will break out or cops will kick down the door or I'll lose track of them in the crowd. She wishes all of these things would happen simultaneously, but it's too late, I'm already there.

"Hey!" I shout.

He turns around. "Hey, Ted! Long time no see!"

This time I didn't faze him with the element of surprise— he's too tipsy to be fazed, and his innocence comes out in his stupor. But I look over at Faith and can tell she wants to blink this moment away.

"How was your summer?" I yell above the noise.

"It was fine, Ted," says Faith. She gives his arm a squeeze, and he looks into the top of her mermaid hair like it's a reflective pond. He smiles at whatever he sees in there, then turns to me.

"So do you like, still live in town?" He asks.

"Yeah, I've got a place not too far from where I was last year," I say.

"So you have a job in town then?"

"Well, no, I'm still figuring that part out," I say.

"Oh, that's cool," he says. He gives me a small, flat smile, like the kind you'd give to a stranger in an elevator.

Faith turns to his ear. "Honey, can you go get me a drink?" she asks.

"Of course," he says.

"See if there's any diet lemonade left," she says. "Not the fruit punch, I can't stand what 5 O'Clock tastes like in fruit punch. And only half full."

"Can I get you anything, Ted?" He asks.

"I'll come with you," I say.

"Wait," says Faith. She hesitates a beat or two. "I'll come with too."

As I trail him and Faith to the kitchen, I feel a tap at my shoulder. It's Mandi. Her eyes are wide, but from the way she's not quite looking at my pupils I can tell she's gone. How she has remained upright this entire time is anyone's guess.

"Mandi I really have to go—"

"Surething," she shouts, though she grabs the cuff of my Keep Calm shirt and pulls me in. "But is that Faith you're following? You two back together or somethin'?"

"Ha," I say. "Hardly."

"Okay good, 'cause like, wow Teddy, you were not good for her."

"Excuse me?"

"Oops, sorry," she says. "It's the vodka talking, not me, I swear. Enjoy your night!"

"No, hold on," I say. "What're you talking about?" I try to keep an eye on Faith and him, but they're getting further away.

"We all thought it," she says, like that cleared things up. "Have you tried an upside-down fruit slammer? It's Hi-C, fruit punch, vodka and beer. Joe Ryder made it up, he's a god."

"Focus, Mandi," I say.

"What?"

"What were you saying about Faith and me?"

"Oh, that you... I don't know. All I know is that after a while, everyone said she stopped talking about the MCAT or even her classes," says Mandi. "All she'd do was fret over you. Now how 'bout that fruit slammer? Where is the kitchen?"

"So what if she talked about me?" I say. "She was supposed to talk about me."

"Yeah, I guess," says Mandi. "It's just... she's gonna be a doctor, you know? I'm not, but I kinda like that she is."

Of course she is. Everything is out there for Faith, and she makes it look upsettingly easy. She's weightless, somehow defying the gravity that makes it near impossible to move forward. If she lost a little steam somewhere along the line, relatively speaking it wouldn't be all that big a loss. And it certainly wouldn't be my fault.

"Do you two still talk about me, ever?" I say.

"We're not really close anymore," she says. "Sometime around when you two got together, she stopped coming to our Friday study groups. She said they weren't convenient anymore, but I don't get that—they were at lunch."

I can't see Faith and him anymore, so I push past Mandi and beeline for the kitchen.

Though it's just as jam-packed, entering the kitchen is like entering a different point in time and space. The area is fully drenched in cold, industrial light, light that illuminates all the horror and sins of the party. Countertops shine with dried beer that gives them a lacquered finish. Cabinets hang open, revealing a sad scattering of plastic dishes and cups that have been put back dirty by someone clearly above the legal limit. If the kitchen had a theme, that theme would be "reality." In the absence of music, people in here talk at almost a normal volume, and about more sensible things, as if their lurid surroundings have sobered them up.

Faith isn't here, but he is. He's holding a brown bottle and looking for the trash can—a funny sight in the middle of all this mess. I'm about to go up to him when I see Faith out back on the sagging porch steps. The back of her head is framed by an ugly rip in the screen door. She's resting her forearms on the deck ledge and standing very still, looking out at the nothingness of the unlit backyard. Her fingers wipe the sweat off the label on an abandoned beer, and though she keeps her eyes trained on the distance, she takes care not to leave a bead of condensation on the bottle. In the kitchen, he is still working on his feeble attempt at cleaning.

I swing open the warped screen door and step outside.

"What are you doing," I say.

She doesn't turn around. "I'm getting air."

"God forbid you don't get enough of that," I say.

"Why won't you let me be?"

It doesn't come out angry, just uncharacteristically quiet. I get the sense that I'm eroding her, bit by bit. I'm still hovering behind her.

"Why did you cheat on me, Faith?"

"I don't know."

"Well that's great."

She says nothing.

"You think you're so wonderful," I say. "You think you have it all figured out. But you don't."

"Please, don't do this again."

"And when you're out of this place you're going to realize that."

It's silent for a while. I was expecting her to have something to say in return.

"I'm applying to Wash U for med school," she says eventually. "But I'm also applying to Duke. Know why?"

"Faith this isn't the time—"

"I'm applying because my dad wants me to. He loves Duke with a passion, because it was his Alma Mater. So when he says he wants me to go there, what he means is that he's rooting for me."

"Okay."

She turns around. "I don't think you were rooting for me, ever."

"Don't be ridiculous," I say.

"And it's hard not to be angry about that," she goes on. "You were my boyfriend." Her voice is marbly, breaking slightly under the weight of her words. She looks tired. In my mind, Joe Ryder is draining every last drop of his Natty Light before crushing it to a pulp.

"Why were you even with me for so long?" she says.

I stare. Visually, she looks the same as when we met. But somewhere along the line she surpassed me in age, and now it feels like she's the one who's graduated, like she's more than me, and all I can do is look to her for answers. Her hair is the same as it's always been but now I find it intolerable.

Faith's boyfriend pokes his head out the door.

"You feeling better, honey?" he asks.

"Yeah," she says. "A little."

Back in the kitchen, Faith's boyfriend peers into the top of the Gatorade cooler marked, *D lem + vodka*.

"All they have is fruit punch," he says to Faith. "I'm sorry, honey."

"Then just a beer I guess," Faith says.

He takes two bottles off the counter, passes one to her and one to me. It's not cold.

"So Ted," says Faith, "If you're in between things, what are your plans?"

They're both looking at me, a unit. If it weren't for the beers they'd look a lot like parents in the way they're coupled together.

"I'm going to apply to some stuff," I say. "I've been looking at some stuff."

"Didn't you want to go into politics, Ted?" Faith asks. She's tipping slightly, and I realize she's been a little tipsy this entire time, she's simply masked it well. "Didn't you want to make the world a better place?"

"Yeah, I do, I..."

Instantly, she and I are back in our studio apartment a year ago, sitting on the edge of the bed. We're still happy, or at least we think we're happy, and I've just told her I want to be a politician, but not one of the bad ones. I tell her I want to put the bad ones in their place. I start to tear up with the weight of it all, and she crosses her leg in between mine, brushes the hairs on the base of my neck with her fingertips. "Doesn't everyone who goes into politics say that?" She asks. She rubs my back briskly, then gets off the bed and walks to the kitchen. I watch her back as she unloads dishes from the dishwasher, mermaid hair fuzzy and misshapen from having slept with it down.

"So," Faith says to him, "we should probably get back to the group, right?"

"I Left My Phone" by Samantha Stagg

Copyright 2021 by Samantha Stagg

Finalist story in the 2021 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest

Associated Colleges of the Midwest ACM.edu/NickAdams

Note: This story is reprinted with permission. Reproduction of this story without the express, written permission of the author is prohibited.

"Right," he glances at the door to the living room. "So Ted, we'll see you around, I assume?"

"I guess," I say.

They make their way to the door. I watch with my beer still in hand, warm and unopened, as she takes his arm and smiles. He leans close to her ear and whispers something that makes her laugh the kind of laugh that needs to be covered up with a hand. Despite spending hours at a zoo of a party, her mermaid hair, the color of a dirty penny, falls in a perfect, unified sheet down her back.

"Wait!" I say.

He turns around; she lingers before doing the same.

I set my bottle on the counter and march up to them. I look him right in the eyes.

"Faith cheated on me with you," I say, though it comes out a little louder than I intended. "She came home one day and told me about you. I just thought you should know what kind of person you're dating. And Faith," I turn to her. "Enjoy this while you can, before *someone* transfers to Oberlin and you never see him again."

It was only a sentence or two but I'm sucking in air like I'd held myself underwater a little too long. For an extended moment, it's just the three of us in this world—the two of them clinging to one another, me standing in front of them like I just staked a flag in the ground. I think about Faith saying "please" three times in a row last May and *him* ripping his napkin to shreds at commencement. But I also think about how when Faith came back to the apartment late that one night wearing a men's XL sweatshirt that said "Arkansas All-State Basketball Champs 2016," the words she decided to say to me were, *I guess you should probably know, if you haven't already guessed.*

"Um..." he says at last, "I know that."

I blink at him. I can't think of anything to say.

"Yeah, and I know he's leaving for Oberlin," says Faith. "We're going to try long distance."

It doesn't make sense. My mind is blank.

"It wasn't easy to face some of it, but he and I talked about all this, like, ages ago, when we started getting more serious," says Faith. "Honestly, Ted, what the hell?"

The world, which had stopped, comes to life around me, and I feel small and ridiculous within it. Suddenly, I am hyper aware of how idiotic my body is, nothing but organs tightly crammed into a frame and drowning in blood. The fluorescent kitchen lights seem to have brightened, making the stained countertops and dirty cups look even more offensive. If I were drunk, I could take this; I wouldn't notice the stickiness of the floor or the stale smell that has settled in what I'm fairly certain is an unventilated space. I could match the way everyone talked with rancid breath and excessive gestures, and I would drift with the easy, floating nature of the party. I wouldn't be standing here talking to my ex-girlfriend and her new boyfriend, who is not new but in fact old at this point, jammed in the festivities like a stick in the mud. Where was my damn phone?

He looks at me with pitying eyes, and with that, Faith and her boyfriend turn and disappear through the living room door frame.

"I Left My Phone" by Samantha Stagg

Copyright 2021 by Samantha Stagg

Finalist story in the 2021 ACM Nick Adams Short Story Contest

Associated Colleges of the Midwest ACM.edu/NickAdams

Note: This story is reprinted with permission. Reproduction of this story without the express, written permission of the author is prohibited.

I glance to the side and see my phone, clothed in its flaking red case, shellacked to the counter by beer. It looks like it could be a relic. I imagine if I didn't pick it up, no one would ever move it, and hundreds of years from now they would erect a glass museum case around it and charge people to come through. They'd title it, *The Party Years*, and say it perfectly encapsulates a moment in time.

I pick up the phone. The stickiness makes a sound like Velcro ripping apart. I slip through the crowd and exit the back kitchen door.