

I Woke Up Alone Again
By Dalton Eloy

"It's really the truest testament to our evolution," she said, stirring the drink she had yet to try, "to fuck and never even think of having a kid."

Her new friend, Bill, choked on her words and smiled, unsure of how to react. It was sexy when she cursed, something I had grown very fond of over our few years together. But this is an argument I had heard multiple times before, one she's very fond of making, so it's not as shocking to me as it once was, though I'm not sure why she has to tell everyone she meets.

We had just arrived at a tequila bar in Harlem, a place we sometimes went to on nights when we didn't want to think too hard. I had just finished up a dull week of work, but she was as spunky as ever. While I felt like having a few quasi-silent drinks together, she struck up a conversation with the gentleman next to her. Bill was some kind of finance man and was very interested in their discussion. This was a regular occurrence. Everywhere we went, she met someone, and I was dragged into whatever it was she decided to talk about. I didn't mind when the people were interesting, but my God it was terrible when they were not. Bill was not.

They bonded immediately over his choice of mezcal. It played out just as you might think: "I'll have a mezcal, neat, please."

"I love mezcal!"

And that was it. Often, they wouldn't even notice me sitting there next to her, and when they did, or when she got around to introducing me, they were disappointed. This was one of those times, and, considering my feelings about the current conversation, I didn't mind. I've always liked the way she can talk to anyone. It's impressive. It helps, too, that she's not bored when, like tonight, I don't feel much like talking.

I'd rarely say this to anybody about anyone, but she's magnetic. There is nothing like a girl who sprinkles the word 'fuck' into her conversations.

"We drank it all throughout Mexico a few years back," she said, without turning towards me or breaking eye contact with Bill.

We had. We drank barrels of it. That was just a few months after we started dating, about two years ago. I had promised to visit a friend in Cuernavaca for some stupid reason. Finally, after she had dropped enough not-so-subtle hints at traveling together, I bought the tickets. Plus, having friends in Mexico is cool. I was still trying to impress her around that time, and this seemed like the perfect concoction of drinking, fucking, and looking cool so we could drink and fuck some more. We traveled around and got blitzed on the stuff until my blood ran liquid smoke and I couldn't bear the smell. I still can't.

Since then, mezcal invaded the city and became the newest hip ingredient. Every cocktail bar in Manhattan had it; that was about all I could take. I went back to tequila, and I flushed red every time she talked about Mexico and mezcal.

"Another shot and a beer, please. Tequila." The shot-and-a-beer deal here is one of the best in Manhattan.

Starting at mezcal, their conversation somehow cracked and contorted until they landed on her views of human reproduction. I sat and listened, joining in when called upon. But mostly I thought about my time as a bartender south of Houston Street and how it almost killed me. And how I'd love to talk to this particular bartender, not about bartending, but about the way her breasts move as she stirs. And is it killing her? The hours? The drinking? The feeling of power to give people what they want, only to wake up the next day, broke, sleeping with some random

person in the East Village because you don't want to go back to your shitty apartment and be reminded of the complete lack of power you actually have?

"So, you don't want kids, then?" I could feel Bill's erection in that question mark.

"Of course not," she replied, standing tall upon her steely logic. "Every animal—plants, even—are hard-wired to reproduce. It's coded in their DNA. They do it without thinking. Plants do it without fucking *brains*. Only humans can choose whether they make more humans or not, and until recently, we coded our reproductive necessities into our social norms. My foremothers had hundreds of thousands of kids by force because that determined their worth." Bill's head bobbed along, his mouth moving slightly along with hers, and I caught an eyebrow raise as she hit her crescendo; she's got him.

"Not me," she continued. "It's not coded in my DNA. No one will marry me based on how many little fuckers I can shoot out of my body. I choose not to have kids because I can choose. Anyway, there are too many people on this fucking planet."

And there it was — the well-rehearsed diatribe I've heard so often, passionate and edgy, terse and off-putting but sound. Acquaintances, friends, family—even my mother—all got the business without warning. And I'm always there, standing in the corner, holding her drink as she gesticulates.

It felt almost as though I just watched them fuck. She was breathing a little heavier. Bill was quiet and pensive, trying to form some words to show his agreement. I almost wanted to offer him a cigarette, though I don't smoke anymore, and I chuckled at the thought.

Still, I kind of love it, to be honest. The logic is right up my alley: subversive, bold, maybe unfounded, possibly provable—badass. And genuine. Watching her eyes glow as she said something she knows will make every interlocutor uncomfortable made me smile. It is—by definition and to her point—unnatural, and I smirk as they squirm.

I drank my shot of tequila alone and listened, proud and trying not to smile.

She'd had this philosophy since I'd met her, and she never spared me her plans. In fact, it was her who opened the conversation on our third date.

"Do you want kids?" she asked.

"I'm not sure," I said, uncomfortably equivocating to what might come next. At the time, as I think every guy would do, I had left that response open so as not to jeopardize my evolutionary right to fuck this beautiful girl and not get her pregnant.

"I don't," she said. And it was then I got the business for the first time, mouthing her words, raising my eyebrows, locked in her eyes. I couldn't believe this woman I had just met a few days prior was espousing her every reproductive belief, but I was enthralled, same as this stiff, Bill, next to us.

Almost three years later, that fact remains. I wonder what would have happened had I said yes. Yes, I do want kids. Maybe they'd have her eyes and her intelligence. Maybe they'd have my lack of allergies. Or maybe that would have been our last date. Maybe we wouldn't be living together in the East Village, which I can finally afford because I'm only paying half the rent. Maybe my friend would still be bugging me to visit him in Cuernavaca. Maybe my taste for mezcal might linger, but I'd still be embarrassed to order it.

"My oldest is 7," Bill said.

Or she might have stayed. And maybe we'd be talking about the future. Maybe we'd be talking about kids.

"Another shot and a beer, please. Tequila."

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And there I was again, watching as she moved: light, passionate, unassuming but powerful, slightly to the music. I hated the song.

"A shot and a beer, please. Tequila," I said.

The shot-and-beer at this bar was expensive but doable. It was a very average Sunday afternoon in Manhattan. Light jacket weather. We meet here at the bar/restaurant under her East Village apartment every now and then. It's fairly close to my place but far enough away to avoid being noticed. Charlie lives on the top floor of this building by herself and pays some ungodly amount, but I love that about her. She's braver than I ever was at her age.

On Sundays, they have oysters for a better price than you'd think, and I worked with the bartender back when I was in the industry. So we eat oysters, he hooks it up on drinks, and I look cool as fuck. We only just met a few weeks ago, so I can still look cool around her. I still impress her.

Sometimes Charlie talks about the boys she's seeing, and she asks about my girlfriend. I never answer. Sometimes we don't talk about anything. And we go home and have sex. And that's it. We don't speak or text for days. One day I might think of her and say, "Hey" followed by some emoji I find witty and irreverent. She'll respond more genuinely.

And we meet.

Our encounters have a weight to them, a weight born from their lightness. We talk about nothing. We think about nothing. We dream about nothing. But we drink, and we laugh, and we smoke (I quit smoking, but I smoke.) And we have fun, I guess. I ask nothing; she wants nothing.

My friends don't know about Charlie. She talks about her classes and the people in them, her assignments, and the feelings she's trying to convey in her characters. She's finishing up her creative writing degree at the New School. Sometimes it makes me feel sick, hearing her describe the "weather" of her work as she calls it, but I don't say anything. I don't want to voice how I feel about that, but I do feel a certain way about it.

I'm not sure what she wants, so I never ask. I'm older, and she likes that. Every time we meet, she talks about politics or art or literature (I have a degree in literature, but that's about where my interest stops), and I can tell she's trying to feel older, like the conversations we have actually matter. Charlie intermittently dispenses her opinions on the opinions of her friends and classmates.

"Sometimes I just can't stand it. It's just the same parties every weekend. They talk about nothing! Everyone is trying to seem cooler than everyone else. Who has the more obscure tastes in music and film, that kind of thing. I want to blow my brains out, sometimes, figuratively speaking," she said. I'm not sure if the irony has hit her yet or not.

But with Charlie, I don't worry about anything, and that can be nice. I throw my opinions around here and there, we laugh, and I make corny jokes I'd typically avoid around anyone else, but I don't think about the future or having kids or whether or not I'll live here for the rest of my life. The only things that exist with her are this bar, this drink, and whatever we do after. Nothing else matters when I'm around her. It's nice. I think she feels the same.

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"Fuck him," I said. After saying it, I realized there really wasn't sufficient build-up for that response, but I didn't care. I had to get it out there if I was ever going to start talking about

him and his stupid girlfriend, which was really why I came to this corny Italian restaurant in the West Village. "He's so hard to talk to. I can't figure him out. We sit at that oyster bar for hours, and he barely says a thing."

There was an awkward pause before Michael said, "I don't see why you're with him. You can't talk to him. He doesn't ever call you. He won't dump his girlfriend."

Michael was right. I knew he was. He's not nearly as interested in this conversation as I am. His eyes glazed over as soon as I brought the guy up. And just then, those glazed, light blue eyes shot sideways, looking for the waiter to order another gin and tonic. He always orders gin and tonics.

We dated for a short period a long time ago. I came home from college one summer to our small town in New Mexico, and it happened. It was magical for the time it lasted, but then I went off to school, met new people, and started dating someone. It wasn't really a "break up" so much as it was a "we don't talk anymore, and I'm dating this other guy now" thing. Now, Michael calls me his ex-girlfriend; I call him my best friend. He hates that, and he still says he loves me when he gets drunk.

"Sometimes I bring up his girlfriend just to see how he reacts," I said, cracking a smile both because of the content of the words I just spoke and in anticipation of his reaction to it. I can't help it.

"Yet another reason why you shouldn't even be near him. What are you expecting out of this? He's just going to leave his girlfriend? The girl he lives with?" Michael slugged his gin and tonic. His face is not quite a sneer, so much as a snarl.

It is fantastic to be loved by someone, even if you don't love that person back. Sometimes I think he'd kill for me. Sometimes I think he'll kill me. But I can't be bothered to feel bad. I'm as clear with him as he is with me. I love him. He's in love with me.

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It was 2:30 in the morning, and I couldn't understand why she was Facetimeing me so late. I climbed out of my bed, trying not to disturb the girl in it. The blankets had fallen off her ass, and I could see it in the moonlight. She was older, but she still had a nice ass. A very nice ass.

In my living room, out in Brooklyn far from the West Village bistro where we had dinner at earlier that evening, I answered and whispered hello. I had to speak low because it's two in the morning and because I'd hate for my guest to hear me talking to another girl.

"I can't stand him. I'm telling you. This is it," Charlie said. It's fairly evident she'd been crying. And drinking. She slurred her words. Her top was falling off her shoulder.

"Yes, I've heard that before," I said. I'd been trying to be more direct with her. She hadn't noticed.

Lately, I haven't had to be blasted drunk to tell her snippets of how I felt. I made jokes about getting married. They're not funny, but they got the point across. In the shower, at the laundromat, in a cab, I daydreamed about coming clean again, holding onto the hope that maybe she forgot that I loved her and that all it would take was a readmission of my feelings to change everything. I knew we couldn't get back, back to that summer in New Mexico during our break from college, but God dammit, I wanted to try.

"He kicked me out in the middle of the night. He said his girlfriend caught an earlier flight and I had to leave immediately. He practically threw my stuff at me as I left."

Charlie was so cliché it made me sick. He was cool and older and off-limits. Talking to her makes me angry and sick to my stomach, but I rarely missed her call.

"Come to meet me. I'm going to 169 Bar," she said. I knew this was coming.

"I hate that place. Plus, I live in Brooklyn. It would take me an hour to get there, and it's already 2:30."

I had a strong case against going, but a part of me was already putting on shoes and a jacket, picking up keys from the kitchen counter, and thinking about what to say to the girl in my bed if she woke up and realized I was not there. "Where'd you go?" she'd say and I'd respond with something like, "I couldn't sleep, so I just took a walk." That'd be enough, and I wouldn't care if she believed me anyway. But it was too late, and I didn't want to fucking go.

"Come on. I want to get drunk with you," Charlie said. I felt a pull that made me hate myself. This girl had some kind of power over me, and she fucking knew it. I debated telling her there was a girl in my bed, and I couldn't leave. I'd love to see some sparkle of jealousy in her eyes, some kind of fear that maybe she'd lost me, that she lost her power over me. But I'd probably explode if she didn't care at all, and this was the more likely outcome of the two hypotheticals. The fear of her not caring body slams my desire to see her jealous, and I balk.

"I can't. You should've told me earlier. Come to Brooklyn," I said, knowing she wouldn't. I do anything to make it seem like I wouldn't run a triathlon to smell her breath or hold her hand.

How did I get here? I hadn't the faintest idea, but I started to think that it was I who was pathetic.

"He doesn't even love her," she said, finally realizing we weren't about to meet up. "He told me once."

Charlie had said all this before, and he hadn't said anything of the sort. They had gotten drunk, and he had confided in her. Charlie loved that. I can picture it as clearly as the moon-drenched butt cheeks I can see through the open door to my room. His head low, staring into his can of Modelo and shot of tequila, the exposed brick wall of the hip, East Village bar framing his body. I pictured him feigning sadness as he spoke, though maybe he was sad for some reason, just not because of her.

"My girlfriend doesn't want kids, and I'm not sure how I feel about that," he said, and I saw Charlie's hand reach out to run through his hair. "I don't want to waste anyone's time, especially not mine."

I saw this all as a ploy to string her along, but who knows, really.

Charlie recounted the same story as I imagined it all. The oysters, the sad, desperate stare of a man in the throes of indecision. But he never said he didn't love his girlfriend; that's just what she heard.

"Fuck him, though," Charlie said the same way I'd heard her say it a thousand times before. *Fuck you, too*, I thought.

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I'll come back for the rest of my stuff tomorrow. Send.

I should have seen it coming, I thought. He had been too happy lately. We did the same things all the time. We would see his friend Warren at his bar in Alphabet City on Thursdays. Ryan's restaurant on Tuesdays. All-day happy hour in the Village on Wednesday.

Usually, he sat and drank, talked to the bartender, and said stupid things like "What's the upcharge on that?" or "You can fire our entrees whenever" to prove he once worked at a bar.

Lately, he does the same, but he smiles more and asks me more questions like he's compensating for something. Finding those no-show socks bunched up in the couch cushions, it was clear just what he was compensating for.

What time are you going to be here? he texted back.

I'll text him back in a minute. Michael's place was nice enough for a guy as young as he was. It's big enough to store some luggage for a while, and I didn't mind his neighborhood even though it was way out in Brooklyn. He said I could crash for a few days while I looked for a place. I told my family I was staying with friends. I told my friends I'm staying with family. I can't tell anyone I'm staying in Brooklyn.

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"Let's meet up. Hang out," he said to me. He's never said that. It's always 'Hey' and some stupid emoji. I don't think he really gets emojis. And then we hang out. He told me the other day she found some socks of mine. He had an accusatory tone in his voice like he thought I left them on purpose. And I might've. Maybe I couldn't find the one and didn't want to leave with just one. We were probably drunk anyway. Or hungover. I'm not sure. I didn't do it on purpose. Can you even believe he'd say that?" I said, showing Michael the text messages.

"That he wants to hang out?" he said, finishing the gin and tonic he'd just ordered. I could tell I was in for it.

"No, I mean that he suddenly wants to hang out. I've been after him for so long, and now he wants to hang out."

"If you want to hang out, you should hang out. Seems like everything you've fucking wanted, no?"

"No, it's not. I don't know what I wanted, but this is not it."

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"I'm not coming to the Lower East Side right now. It's just not happening," I said, maybe a little too curtly. Now I felt terrible.

"Don't worry about it. Just come." It's clear she was drinking and laying it on thick, but I wasn't going to go. I'd found out all about what had happened. The girlfriend found out. He's hurt. He called Charlie. She's pissed. She calls me. I'm pissed. I'll go to a bar, but I'm staying the fuck out of the East Village.

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I woke up alone again.