

## Blue Ballad

Conversations that, if you paid attention, framed windows into peoples' lives, the clink of dishes, and the stubborn atmosphere of grease melted into each other to create a separate world beyond Roland's small bubble of focus. Tom emerged from this blur, returning from the bathroom back to his and Roland's table. As he wiped his moist hands on his pants, a drop of water slipped off the end of his pinky and fell. It fell through time, escaping from Tom's finger in one world and landing on the tile floor in another. Roland turned his attention from the drop back to his friend.

"I've loved catching up with you -- I honestly have. It's been too long and I regret not working harder to stay in touch," Tom apologized as he sat down. Roland gazed into Tom's eyes and found the painful memories of gradually losing contact with a dear friend. "But --"

"But that's not the main reason you wanted to meet."

"Correct."

"You want to know why I didn't go the the funeral."

"Correct."

"I've said goodbye already. Too many times."

"But it was your last chance to see her. You were married for --"

"Yeah, I know, I know. It's not like I suddenly decided not to show up. I thought about it. I know all the reasons I should have gone and I decided that there were more reasons not to."

"I just don't understand."

Roland ignored Tom. He wound up his paper straw wrapper left over from the meal. He let the spiral unravel. Then he wound it up tighter and let it go again. Roland tried to wipe up a drop of dried ketchup with the paper tapeworm but couldn't get rid of the last unyielding bit. Searching for something else to think with, Roland scanned the laminate table: two mugs of coffee, both almost empty, crumbs, salt and pepper shakers, both almost full, a collection of sweetener packets, more crumbs, and one of those spring-loaded napkin containers. He decided on the crumbs, multiplying their numbers with his thumbnail. Roland's head fidgeted, and Tom liked to imagine this jerking was caused by the momentum of an idea bouncing around his head. He couldn't tell if Roland's scowl came from his thoughts or from his inability to split a particularly small crumb. Tom loved to hear Roland's theories. He found them compelling yet slightly off-putting, like delicious-smelling food prepared by someone who hasn't washed his hands. Finally, Roland spoke.

"I didn't go because I'm trying to forget about her."

"What?" Tom chuckled. "Why?"

"It hurts every time I think of her. I try to only focus on when we were happy, but when that memory ends I remember that I'll never see her again. Ever. She's gone." Roland's voice cracked. "It's too much for me."

"But you can't just wipe away all that time. It happened, so make the most of those memories."

Roland fell silent again, returning to his straw wrapper, folding it into a series of corners, a maze with one path.

“Remember that exhibition game in high school? Where seniors who weren’t on the basketball team had a chance to play”

“Sure, of course.” Tom tried to be patient with this tangent.

“I was in the game towards the end of the first half. Remember how the clock was broken, so players had to guess how much time had passed? Well I got the ball with hardly any time left. I had looked forward to that moment for so long. It was my chance to show everyone that they were wrong about me. They looked at me and saw that I did well in school and assumed a million things that eventually became some sort of agreed-upon reality. They saw a small piece of me and assumed it was my whole. I was pretty athletic, but no one cared enough to find out. Most of our grade was watching. I got the ball and everyone was yelling, ‘Shoot! Shoot!’ I thought the buzzer was about to go off, so I tossed the ball up over the defenders with embarrassingly bad form, and it went over the backboard. Five seconds later, the buzzer went off. I could have dribbled past the defenders for an easy shot, but I didn’t know I had enough time.”

Tom tried to figure out what Roland was getting at. He examined his friend closely. He was nearly positive Roland had been donning a toupee for the last decade or two, though he never mentioned his doubts about the thick, black hair’s authenticity. Delicate ears hugged his head on either side. The centerpiece of his face was a thin, pointy nose. Roland was well-groomed, but not very well taken care of: beneath thin lips that seemed to be painted on were light yellow teeth. He was a bookkeeper for a local crime syndicate. Perhaps the accumulated stress of falsifying records and lying to the IRS caused bags to balloon beneath his blue eyes. His neck and head wilted at the shoulders, though he had slouched since childhood. That day he wore a tailored suit: dark grey wool with a cerulean button-down underneath. In Roland’s outfit Tom saw the sky shrouded by grim clouds. Roland didn’t wear a watch, as he insisted that clocks don’t represent the inherent flexibility of time. Tom turned back to the conversation. “And then what? What would have been different? You are literally the only person who remembers that.”

“It mattered -- it *matters* to me.”

“You think people would have changed their minds about you or treated you differently? They saw you how they wanted to see you. It wasn’t a matter of evidence; you filled a need for them. They needed you to be the person you weren’t.” Tom let it sink in. “What does that story have to do with anything?”

“I’ve thought a lot about that moment. Eventually I realized that one small change would get rid of all the regret and self loathing it caused. All I had to do was make the shot, and I’d be so much more at peace.”

“But you didn’t. Come on, get over it. It’s so insignificant.”

“Not for me.” Tom decided to take the conversation more seriously after hearing the determination in Roland’s voice. “That’s just one example. There are dozens of memories like it, where a small change would make a huge difference. So I started playing with the idea that I

actually *did* make the shot, that the versions with the small adjustments were correct. And I repeated these new variants to myself until they replaced the originals. Until I started to forget the ‘right’ version. I’ve practiced this over and over. Now I have difficulty remembering which one actually happened.”

“Okay, but you didn’t make the shot. Facts are facts.”

Roland winced a little at the last sentence.

Tom stared at Roland; Roland looked at the table.

“It’s how I plan on getting over -- getting over...her.”

“What? You’re gonna just erase her from your memory? You’re --”

“Not erase. Alter. I used the word ‘forget’ earlier -- that’s the wrong word. I don’t care that she existed, I care that I loved her. If I can just...” Roland looked for the right word, “...*revise* any interactions with her so that we were only acquaintances, her memory won’t hurt. It will be sad that she’s gone, but not painful.”

“But you lived together for years. You can’t ‘revise’ that away.”

“Okay, you’re right. I will erase that.”

“You can’t be serious. Deal with it.” Tom’s counsel might have been irritating to Roland if it wasn’t delivered with so much concern. “This has happened to millions of other people. You think you’re the first to --”

“No, of course not. But I’ll be the first to handle it like this.”

“It’s absurd!”

“This is what what works for me.”

“But you’re lying to yourself.”

Another quick wince from Roland. “Look, you know I always try to arrive at a rational decision. Let me at least explain my thinking.”

“Go ahead.” Roland’s intelligence and creative approach to morality made him perfect for his job and a fun person to talk things over with.

“Okay.” He worked to tame the wild gusts of thoughts that had swarmed his mind ever since his wife died and left every part of him empty. “Think about what’s going on right now. We’re perceiving the world around us. That is, we’re perceiving the present. And to do this we take in massive amounts of information every second. But our brain takes short cuts -- how could it not? It condenses all this information, emphasizes what it thinks is important, and gets rid of supposedly unnecessary details. Are you following me so far?”

“Maybe. Not really.” Tom admitted, laughing.

“That’s fine. Hmmm...Let’s see.” Roland’s wide, excited eyes searched the table. “How many sugar packets are in this dish? I couldn’t tell you. Yet the answer is right in front of us. Our brains just decide to not bother with information like that.”

“Okay, I think I’m with you.”

“Great. Well how do we know that this impression of reality we have is correct? I’m not trying to get into some convoluted thing about reality being an illusion. I’m just pointing out that there is a lot of room for error. How often has it happened that you thought something was one

way but it turned out to be another, after you gave it a second look?” Tom’s blank stare told Roland to elaborate. “Back to the sugar packets, for example. You used one -- the yellow one. What brand was it?”

“Splenda, right?”

“That’s what I thought at first! But the design looked different, so I checked it again and it’s actually something called Spleenda.”

“Huh. I guess that’s a little interesting.”

“I know! And I make little mistakes like that all the time, as I bet you do, too. Now consider memory. The human memory is notoriously unreliable, from nostalgia to witness testimony. Think about what memory is: it’s our recollection of a past present. Suddenly you have an inaccurate representation of an inaccurate representation! What would Dr. Bilsa always say?” Roland made his voice rough and raspy to imitate their former teacher. “Tell me, students, what’s the propagation of error?”

They both smiled.

“Just to make sure I understand you correctly, you’re saying that we sometimes make small mistakes in our observations, like the Spleenda thing, and then we also sometimes misremember those observations. So as a result there’s a quite a bit of room for error. Really what you’re getting at is, who’s to say that any of our memories are correct?”

“Yes!” Roland’s lowered face lit up like a child meeting his idol. “Why should our original memories be more valuable than slightly modified ones?”

“That’s just it. You’re taking something that’s already flawed -- as you’ve been saying -- and then making it even more incorrect. A million things *didn’t* happen. One thing did. Maybe we can never know what that one thing was, but a memory is a best guess. It’s almost immoral to deny yourself and others that best guess. I’m sorry, but it just sounds like a bunch of armchair psychology to me.”

As Tom responded, Roland, who had already counted this conversation as a victory, gradually darkened from frustration and embarrassment. They sat in silence for a couple of minutes. A waitress came by with more coffee. Tom shook his head and waved his hand, saying, “No thank you” with a smile, so she turned to Roland. She looked at him and she understood. She studied his eyes, frozen through with grief, and his wrinkles carved out of sorrow. His aura of spiritual desperation hummed its blue ballad into her skin. She understood the entirety of who he was. She tasted his bitter story, his sour longing for relief. She did all she could, providing the closest thing she had to an antidote: a thawing smile of acceptance and a refill of coffee.

The waitress turned and left, exiting into the hazy rest of the world. Roland leaned over to lay his elbows on the table and stared into the coffee. Its aroma slithered up through the air, fighting the rhythm of his soft breathing, crawled in through his nose, then burrowed deep into the front of his brain where it revived his dormant memories. He had often assured himself that if he found someone attractive enough he would approach her. Maybe half a dozen times before, Roland just stood, fighting the impossible battle that is reason versus fear, but somehow, when he saw her, determination overcame timidity. He sat down across from her. She was studying, as

Roland had intended to before becoming distracted, and sipping on coffee out of a styrofoam cup. She looked up. Tom looked up at Roland. Tom's rigid face bore furrowed eyebrows before shifting to a tender grin. Their first evening together was alchemistic, transmuting abstract thoughts into tangible love. Neither one was inexperienced, but neither one had experienced anything like that night. Everything was so natural; mechanical yet fluid, like two gears only concerned with keeping the other one going. Roland woke up before she did, so he made breakfast and coffee. He sat down on his bed beside her and just stared for a second, steeped in bliss. Her hair glowed in the morning sun like red amber while goosebumps textured her fair skin. "Claire," he whispered. "Claire." She squinted and stretched before seeing him and smiling. He handed her a mug of coffee. Roland picked his coffee up from the table with two hands, cherishing the warmth in the overly air-conditioned diner. He took a sip and let that warmth spread through him, down his throat and chest to his core, spreading through his legs and feet and toes and even toenails, then up his back, through his neck and into his head and face, ears and nose, back down through his arms, his hands, his fingers, until all cold was gone from his body. Still half asleep, Roland staggered into the kitchen and kissed Claire on the back of the head before she had a chance to turn around, then sat down. She set his coffee down in front of him, something she had done ever since she started teaching at the high school and had to wake up earlier than him -- something she would continue to do day after day after day for years. She kissed him on the head and left for work. When Roland placed his mug back down on the table he noticed Tom watching him closely. That was fine -- he knew Tom was only worried. As far back as Roland could remember, even when they were kids, Tom somehow combined the compassion of a child with the maturity of an adult, and this steady temperament somehow made its way into his appearance. He had a round face and silky, golden hair trimmed dangerously close to a bowl cut, yet his soft skin held the charming wrinkles of an old man. Tom's wife worked while he stayed at home with his kids. Roland hadn't seen the kids in a few years and couldn't remember exactly how old they were. He wondered what more they had learned of life, what they had discovered, what made them laugh and cry now and what they stopped laughing and crying about. He hunched over, forearms on thighs, in a waiting room chair. It had been hours since he first arrived at the trauma ward, with nothing to do but wait. Roland sipped coffee out of a styrofoam cup. He pushed his thumb nail into the styrofoam to make a narrow depression, then rotated the cup until he couldn't see the mark anymore. From the instant he got the call saying there had been an accident, Roland somehow knew, whether from intuition or pessimism, that it was the end. So by the time a doctor came out and said they did everything they could, Roland had already been crying for hours. He looked down. Tom's veiny hands rested on the table wiped with a mildewed rag soaked in sullied vinegar water. The world closed in around Roland until it was only him and he was alone. The world closed in until he was vacuum-sealed in isolation, until he didn't even have the air to listen to him breathe. His throat became a knot. His body filled with hot sand that burned the inside of his skin. Blood still coursed through him but so did sand, and his heart pumped this silt until it ached and swelled and sank deep into his chest. Sand pushed in on his lungs and made his chest heavy. Every smallest

breath took everything out of him, over and over again. He had nothing left but somehow had to keep going. Within his head was nothing, a torturous, itching nothing. His head was heavy with nothing. He felt nothing, except useless. He knew there was another world outside of his own, he could perceive it, but he couldn't reach it.

No, he couldn't take it.

Suddenly Roland looked like he hadn't slept in days. Bloodshot eyes, pale skin, bags darkened under his eyes -- Tom was sure he must have been imagining it.

"My point is that we forget things everyday, we misremember things everyday. Maybe I'm straying farther from the truth, or maybe I'm getting closer. We will never know what we have forgotten, what we have misremembered, until we are reminded. In the absence of evidence, the truth can be what we make it."

"That's not right. The truth is the truth."

"I don't care." Roland gave up. "Even if you're right, that doesn't matter. If it doesn't hurt anyone, and it helps me, why shouldn't I do it?"

"It does hurt you. It separates you from everyone else. The truth is something that grounds us. It unites us. The truth is something that everyone has, everywhere, no matter who they are. People may look at the truth differently, or even distort it, but you're talking about something on a whole nother level. At least liars still know the truth; when you lie to yourself, though, you lose it completely. Ignore the truth enough and you'll be living in an entirely fictional world independent of the real one."

"Stop preaching to me, okay? What was that shit? You make it seem so serious and dramatic -- it's not a big deal."

"Roland, look at me. You. Will. Get. Through. It. I will help you. I won't let you do this to yourself."

"Come on, please. Just let me handle it how I want to."

"No. We will work through it. It was honestly really painful for me when we lost contact. I understand that we were starting up new lives, but we have a second chance here. We were -- we are -- such good friends." Tom wasn't being entirely honest. Just as much as his friendship with Roland, he wanted to protect his ties to the past. Every day he became more and more aware of his age. Roland was a time machine to childhood, high school, and college, when worries were trivial. Nothing mattered then, everything mattered now. Aging and fatherhood suffocated Tom. Seeing Roland made him smile and let him breathe.

"No, Tom. The past doesn't exist." Roland sensed Tom's double motives. "Memories, just like relationships, are constructs of the mind. We don't have memories so that we can be tortured by our pasts; memories exist for their utility. I'm just trying to get the the most use out of mine." Roland's conviction physically hurt Tom.

"I hate to say it, but I don't care what you say at this point. You're not going to convince me."

"Please, leave me alone."

"I won't. I need you. And you need me." Tom was sincere.

“Seriously, stop.”

“I won’t. Even if you try to forget Claire I will never stop reminding you of her. I can’t let you do that to yourself.”

Roland had reluctantly anticipated this situation. Before acting on his contingency plan he had to be certain there was no other option. “You’re really sure you won’t let me off the hook? You won’t let me be?”

“Yes. This is the best thing for everybody. I’m sure of it.”

“Alright, let me just go to the bathroom and we can leave.” Tom was always relieved when it was his turn to pay because Roland consistently left tips better suited for the ‘50s.

Roland closed the door and rotated the turn-lock. Leaving the stall door open, he set the toilet seat down and sat on it, his elbows on his knees and his chin resting on his fists. He closed his eyes. Roland unpacked materials for the narrative he prepared for this exact series of events. A sharp pain shot into his forehead, as if his skull was made of glass and it was breaking over and over in the same tiny spot. In Roland’s city of memory, some recollections only needed renovations, though many were bulldozed with new histories constructed in their place. Quickly yet carefully, Roland razed all traces of his relationship with Claire. The purged memories formed a tear in the right corner of his left eye. He lost all sense of time during this process. All at once the pain lifted and he knew he was done.

Roland left the bathroom. He strode past Tom, who stared at Roland’s chair and allowed everything else to blur. As he walked by his empty chair, the tear slipped off his cheek and fell through time. By the time the tear landed on the tile floor, Roland had left the diner, exiting Tom’s world forever, a fictitious person in a real universe like an animated character in a live-action movie. A figment of his own imagination.