

the Lost Project

by

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For: You.

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INTRO

The song “Ready to Start” from The Arcade Fire’s album, *The Suburbs*, played on the radio the night my mother and I drove to Akron General Hospital in preparation for my nephew’s birth. It was the commercial free radio station, WAPS, 91.3, The Summit, during the three-hour block of programming designated as “Rock n’ Recovery.” The playlist was a mix of positive uplifting music for people experiencing recovery from addictions, mental disorders and trauma. “Ready to Start” was being played just for me, to send me a special message.

The night was balmy and still. We pulled into the McDonald’s drive-thru to buy my sister two sausage, egg and cheese biscuits. A meal in lieu of the turkey sandwich she was offered at the hospital prior to the labor for her first-born child. I ordered an iced latte, but the cashier said over the intercom that the machine for specialty, cold, coffee drinks was shut down for the night. So, I settled for a large cup of regular, hot coffee with three creamers

I had sudden flashbacks of my good friend, the old paranoia. Pynchonesque horror that the might of this Western Industrial Military Complex was looking out for me and my soon-to-be born nephew, would harvest us, would direct us to safety as consumers, would preen us for war, would fashion us as taxpayers in peace time.

Seventeen months prior to my sister’s labor and the impending birth of my nephew, I had been admitted to the very same hospital. I had received care in The Center for Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences unit located on the sixth floor of Akron General Hospital.

By the time I held my newborn nephew, I had a hickey on my neck.

PART ONE

“Mara taunts me ‘neath the trees.
She’s like, ‘Oh great, that’s just what we all need.
Another white guy in two thousand seventeen
Who takes himself so god damn seriously.’”
-- Father John Misty, “Leaving LA.”

A story I wrote:

“Barberton Monday Night”

When alcoholics said they first came into the rooms for the free coffee and doughnuts, it was supposed to be a joke. Lucia Lovelace O’Malley never found the joke that funny because she thought the coffee routinely tasted like shit. In different churches throughout Akron neighborhoods, meetings unified with a familiarity of radiators, exposed piping, drop ceilings, linoleum tiles, metal folding chairs and urns filled with coffee that routinely tasted like shit. Barberton Monday Night, an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting held in the cafeteria of St. Augustine’s Church, was no different.

Lucia pulled a Styrofoam cup from the top of its stack on the back counter. Fingerprint smudges on the coffee urn matted an oily halo over Lucia’s already distended reflection in its silver enamel. Granules of sugar and powdered creamer had crusted on the rims of their bulk canisters. Instead of stir-straws, two spoons soaked in a cup of water filmy with spittle and motes. Not very sanitary, and Lucia always thought it was just asking for a breakout of Herpes or Hep C to run wild through members of AA yet uninfected.

The free doughnuts part of the joke wasn’t funny either, because the pastry selection at meetings had been equally disappointing. At The Place To Be AA meeting, a woman worked for the Gardner Pie Company, and she brought in rejected pies when it met every Sunday evening. Lucia had no complaints there the previous night when she’d wolfed down a slice of cherry, apple and peach. All Barberton Monday Night had was a batch of homemade cookies on a Tupperware tray yellowed with age. A fear of intestinal parasites, or something else gross and highly transmittable that a person in recovery may have picked up while still out using, made

Lucia steer clear of anything homemade in AA meetings. Which could be interpreted as either healthy caution or hypocritical snobbery, since during the qualifying days of her not so distant past, she'd eaten food out of dumpsters.

To avoid using the spoon, Lucia had a technique where she added creamer first. She flipped the tab on the urn. Coffee streamed from the nozzle and swirled an umber mix in her cup. Undissolved flakes of non-dairy creamer circled outward and clung to the cup's Styrofoam side. She turned and faced a man she hadn't noticed was waiting for coffee at her side.

"Hi. I'm John." His hand extended in greeting.

Lucia shook it. "Hi, I'm Lucia."

Some were disciplined at introducing themselves and made a point to shake hands with everyone in attendance before a meeting. Lucia didn't. The ritual seemed repetitive and useless. They'd go around the room and all state names Lucia wouldn't remember at the start of the meeting anyways. AA was filled with forgettable guys like John: creeping past middle aged, leathery skin, balding, dressed in jeans and a Polo, their odor of body grease masked with a gamey scent of aerosol antiperspirant. All with common one syllable names like John or Chuck or Rob or Jeff or Scott or Mark or Will.

John pivoted at the waist in an expectant gesture to the young man standing beside him. "I'd like to introduce Colton," John said. "Colton is new in the program."

She took the hint. "Hi, my name's Lucia." She extended her hand.

"Colton." Colton shook Lucia's hand. Colton's sinewy frame was thin past gaunt, his sick complexion shaded even sicker by jaundiced patches in the hollows of his neck, and cheap tattoos that looked more like nasty bruises dotted on his forearms.

After Colton loosened his grip from Lucia's hand, he sunk his front teeth into his lower lip and vibrated a guttural drone through his throat.

The windows along the opposite wall, the kind with panels that latched in the frame and opened out at an angle, had been opened. Exterior air flowing in didn't ventilate the cafeteria, but perfumed its stuffiness with mingling scents of cut grass and gasoline, dandelions and pothole scum, pollen and damp heaps of fast food wrappers. A noxiously pleasant bouquet Lucia associated with rust belt summers.

To accommodate the droves legally mandated to attend AA meetings, a table had been set up at the bottom of the stairs. Two men with the welcoming briskness and authority of checkpoint guards sat at the table rubber-stamping the pages. A hard luck crew, each brandishing a dog-eared court paper, formed a line that ran up the stairs. Lucia maneuvered her way through it, against the flow, head down, eyes fixed on her coffee to avoid meeting someone's gaze and thus be obligated to shake hands and introduce herself.

Once through the double doors and outside, Lucia retreated to the strip of grass between St. Augustine's and the sidewalk and sat under the squat canopy of the lawn's lone tree. Across the street was a row of bungalows. She lit her pre-meeting cigarette. Two Barberton Monday Night homegroup members stood in front of the double doors. Their responsibility for the meeting, every Monday night, week after week, was to shake hands and introduce themselves to every person that entered. Lucia lowered her ass to the ground, pulled her thighs to her chest, wrapped her arms around her shins and rested her chin in the nook of her knees. One hand curled around her cup of coffee, while the other pinched her lit cigarette. A cloud of secondhand smoke

massed over the clusters and semicircles of people that stood along the curb and sidewalk. Lucia caught what she could of their floating conversations.

The bungalows' dirt yards were littered with cracked water pistols and naked Barbie dolls. A woman in a bathing suit top and spandex shorts sat on a collapsed front porch. The house next door was missing its porch, and a stoop had been improvised from an upside-down milk crate under the front door. Someone nearby sang and played a song Lucia recognized on an acoustic guitar.

Summery dusk, cool but humid, soaked the evening with a gold that cast no shadows. Lucia squinted and the sunlight bent its rays to speckled flares and overexposures on the tips of her lashes. She'd heard the song on radios playing pop country in gas stations and doctors' offices, but didn't know the title. The lyrics had something to do with the longing and regret of a romance gone sour, a desire to reconnect and reconcile hampered by fate and nasty weather conditions. A white passenger van rattled over potholes, its signal blinking to indicate a turn into St. Augustine's parking lot on the corner.

The last bungalow in the row seemed to be under an indefinite renovation. Pink insulation and plastic sheeting scarred above the window. A Tetris pattern of aluminum siding hung along the door. In other areas, the siding had been stripped to exposed slats flaking green paint.

The van emptied its IBH passengers. A dozen wayward women bused out to the meeting as part of their in-patient addiction treatment in The Interval Brotherhood Home, or IBH. The women stretched and blinked with the coy excitement of peasants crawling from dungeons into freedom.

Lucia took a drag of her cigarette and placed her coffee cup by her ankles. She was the main attraction that night. She'd stand at the podium and deliver her first lead in front of the crowd of alcoholics gathered on benches and chairs in the St. Augustine's cafeteria. In a general way, she'd disclose what she was like in her alcoholism, what happened, and what she was like now in recovery. As if those phases of her development were really that different or, with or without alcohol, easy to distinguish from each other. She'd share her story of experience, strength and hope. While her strengths may have been lacking, she had plenty of experience to share. And hope? Hope for who? Hope for what? Lucia still wasn't sure on that one, even after 18 months of staying sober and working a program.

A woman Lucia had met before, but whose name she had forgotten – maybe it was Becky or Sandy or Trudy or something like that – strode out the double doors with the mock force of someone insecure given marginal authority. “Keep it down,” she said with her palms pushing at the air. “Neighbors of this church have to work early, and they've asked time and again we keep the noise down.” She made a big show of squatting to the concrete, and duck-walked to add emphasis to each word as she picked up cigarette butts. “And put your butts in the butt can. If you can't keep the noise down and clean up after yourselves,” she continued, “we won't be able to have this meeting.”

It was an empty threat. Not only was attendance consistently high, but Barberton Monday Night was an institution for both the Akron Area and Alcoholics Anonymous as a whole. It'd been meeting regularly since 1943. Nonetheless, conversations dulled to mutterings. The guitar playing stopped, followed by a ting of strings against fret board as the instrument was pulled off a lap and put in its case.

Women from the IBH van paraded past in groups of twos and threes. Getting off IBH property, if only to attend an AA meeting, was a reprieve from the misery of early recovery exacerbated by in-patient treatment. Younger people, or those who “quit in time” and still had their looks, treated the meetings like a night out on the town and got as glitized up as they could under the circumstances.

The summer weather gave an excuse to show some skin. It was unsettling to watch the women pass, propelled by such fragile limbs. Thin arms probed like flagella when the girls checked their phones or took drags from their cigarettes. Wardrobes had been improvised and mixed from clothes out of the donation bin in a style that Lucia would best describe as, “Corner Bar Ladies’ Night Formalwear.”

A hovering wasp zigzagged through the blades of grass. It circled the rim of Lucia’s coffee cup, then took off again.

Lucia hated the girls from IBH. She hated their low standards. She hated the relativity of their struggles in recovery and sobriety, where miniscule progress was praised as major life accomplishments. More than anything, she hated their innocent abandon. She hated and envied their blind faith in possibilities and potential.

Two guys spoke, shuffling their feet and edging ever closer to the tree. As they did, it became obvious to Lucia she was meant to overhear and eventually be included in their conversation.

“Last I heard, he was your roommate in Kenmore.”

“Yeah. I’m at my stepbrother’s now. I’m serious about it this time.”

“Things’ll get better.

“They can’t get much worse. I had eight months once before, white-knuckling it.”

“You been to any NA?”

“There’s one I like in North Hill, but I can’t always find a ride.”

Lucia cocked her head and saw only the shoes of the young men speaking. A pair of paint-splattered work boots; a pair of garishly unblemished sneakers.

“You got my number. Just get some numbers. Call me.”

“For sure, man, for sure. We’ll hit some meetings, and I’m serious about it this time.”

Lucia looked up, which was a mistake. Work Boots and Sneakers eagerly introduced themselves. She immediately forgot their names.

Colton emerged from the clusters and semicircles of people that stood along the curb and sidewalk. He took a few strides across the strip of grass and started banging his forehead, over and over, really hard, against the brick and mortar wall of St. Augustine’s. Work Boots and Sneakers made a move toward stopping him.

“Whoa-whoa,” Work Boots said. “What’s up, man?”

Sneakers then commented, “I bet he just wanted a cigarette.”

The smell of dust and sweat inside the cafeteria, the scraping and squeaking sounds of chairs and shoes, made Lucia yearn for a childhood she was never nostalgic over. Colors dulled leaden yellow as she walked back into the cafeteria and her eyes adjusted to the artificial light. Two thirds of the seats were occupied, and the remainder of seats were filled by a rush of stragglers trickling through the room while looking for a place to sit. Lucia followed along the wall to the head table. The chairman stood at the podium, checking his watch. The stickiness of the floor made Lucia’s footfalls like walking up a dune or plodding through a bog. She was

careful to look at everything in the room except the settling crowd to soon be her audience, while she took her seat at the head table beside the podium.

“Okay, Lucia, you’re first lead,” the chairman said to her over his shoulder. “Thanks again for doing this.” His buzzcut stippled gray spines over his head. “Nervous?”

She looked at his eyes, but not in them. “Nah.” Their droopy lower lids reminded her of tree frogs or iguanas.

He tapped against the microphone with his index finger. “Okay, it’s eight o’clock, time to get this meeting started. Hello. Hello, and welcome to Barberton Monday Night.”

The walls were ceramic tile of the fashion found in outdated, underfunded schools and hospitals.

“My name is Phil, and I’m your alcoholic chair for the month of August. Let us now go around the room and introduce ourselves, starting with the person on my left.”

“Hello, Family. My name is Charlene, and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hello Charlene,” the meeting answered in unison.

“Hi. Jason. Alcoholic.”

“Hello, Jason.”

“Steve. Alcoholic, addict.”

“Hello, Steve.”

A tiny hole, no bigger than a pinhead, had been burrowed in the caulk along the window ledge. An ant poked its head from the hole in the caulk. The insect looked like a blackhead, a carcinoma, or the blistered syringe prick into a vein. The ant crawled out and crept along the caulk groove. Lucia imagined a pore dripping black sweat, or an abscessed vein rimmed by gluey flesh belching tar.

“Rachel, alcoholic.”

“Hello, Rachel.”

“Hi, Sue, in Recov —”

– and over and over and again. A sloppy roll call. After Sue, there were at least another forty people left. That wasn’t even so bad, compared to Pilgrim up in Cuyahoga Falls. That meeting drew close to a hundred attendees every Saturday night. After over a year in AA, Lucia had desensitized to the introductions, thought of them as filler and was able to space out. Something she suspected others in recovery did too, which defeated the whole purpose of the repetition.

Outside the window, dandelion pods floated by.

Strange that AA meeting formats and ceremonies, routines Lucia had sat through so many times, now seemed trivial minutes before she delivered her first lead. She wondered if while walking out to deliver a State of the Union Address, did the President have secret doubts that he was an empty suit representing an elaborate sham that masqueraded as society?

“Now,” the chairman continued from the podium, “I’ll step aside and let Becky help us out.”

He relinquished the podium to the woman who’d earlier scolded the smokers outside for being too loud and throwing their butts on the ground. It turned out her name was Becky, not Trudy or Sandy.

“Hello, family. My name is Becky, and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hello, Becky.”

So the show began. Glory bestowed upon the once hopeless. A fleeting moment of praise graced over the woebegone amidst their wretchedness.

“Here at Barberton Monday Night, as proof that this really works, we like to award various lengths of sobriety with the chip system,” Becky said. “First things first. Is there anybody here celebrating 24 hours, or someone celebrating up to 29 days who hasn’t gotten a 24-hour chip yet and would like one?” Thick makeup lacquered over her eye sockets and cheekbones accentuated divots of her face to the shiny ridges of an exoskeleton.

Lucia rested her elbows on the table. As she slouched, an abrupt pang in her loins alerted her she had to pee real bad. She couldn’t just get up and go now that the meeting had just started. That would be rude.

“Hi, I’m Viv,” a voice chirped. “I’m in IBH, and I’m powerle –” She stood, egged on by an elbow to the ribs from the woman beside her. “I just had a week and I didn’t get a chip yet.” Applause as Viv shuffled through the crowd to the podium. Dried sweat and deodorant residue, visible when she reached for her chip, had blotched stains under her armpits.

Lucia straightened her posture, repositioning her throbbing bladder. She crossed her legs, uncrossed them, and snapped her eyes in a hard blink to quell a rising sound of reedy sharpness. The air in St. Augustine’s thickened. The slimy smack of clapping hands distorted the applause to intermittent fuzz.

Heavy bass from a passing car’s stereo thumped in through the cafeteria’s open windows.

“That’s great, just great,” Becky said from the podium.

Another passing car, this one without a muffler and moving too fast by the sound of it, thunked over a pothole. Lucia repositioned with her legs open, feet flat on the floor. Not a very ladylike position, but it eased her spasming bladder.

Buttery dusk on the verge of twilight frothed through the windows. Crickets tuned up for their chirping prelude.

Tosha swapped out with Becky and assumed the position behind the podium “Hi, my name is Tosha, and I’m an alcoholic.” Her woolly, auburn hair was styled in a botched perm. “This is how it works, taken from page 58 in the Big Book of Alcoholics Anonymous.” She read from a laminated sheet. “Rarely have we seen a person fail who has thoroughly followed our path. Those who do not recover are people who cannot or will not give themselves over to this simple program, usually men and women who are constitutionally incapable of being honest with themselves. There are such unfortunates. They are not at fault; they seem to have been born that way. They are naturally incapable of grasping a manner of living which demands rigorous honesty. There are those, too, who suffer from grave emotional and mental disorders, but many of them do recover if they have the capacity to be honest.”

The cricket choir bent their strident melodies in through the open windows. Lucia’s gnawing urge to urinate got worse at the prospect of holding it in for another hour while she delivered a speech. Was that crickets she heard, or cicadas?

“Remember,” Tosha continued. “That we deal with alcohol – cunning, baffling, powerful! Without help it is too much for us. But there is One who has all power. That one is God. May you find him now.”

Maybe Lucia didn’t hear crickets or cicadas. Maybe she wouldn’t have to hold it in during her lead. Maybe she heard through the open windows a throaty discord of tree frogs. Lucia would be standing behind the podium. The crowd couldn’t see her from the waist down.

Twelve laminated cards, each printed with one of the twelve steps, had been placed on each of the empty chairs at the start of the meeting.

Were there tree frogs in Ohio? Sure there were, and if Lucia remembered correctly from childhood zoology lessons at summer camp, the tree frogs were most vocal during the mating season in late summer.

Shielded behind the podium, Lucia could piss herself, and no one in the crowd would be the wiser.

“Half measures availed us nothing,” Tosha read. “We stood at the turning point. We asked His protection and care with complete abandon. Here are the steps we took which are suggested as a program of recovery.”

Alcoholics rose from their respective seats and read in tandem from one of the laminated cards. Each person recited a step chronologically on down the line until all 12 had been covered.

“One. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.”

“Two. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.”

An unnatural interval of dead air passed. Only two steps in, and inattentiveness on someone’s part interrupted the flow. Murmurs of ‘Step 3?’ and ‘Who has Step 3?’ rippled through the room.

“Step 3?” Tosha asked into the microphone. “Step 3? Who has Step 3?”

In the front row, a young man was dozing off. Buried in his torpor, his hyena face alternately dipped and rose. The laminated card for Step 3 sat in his lap. A finger jab from someone seated behind him dug into his shoulder.

His serene and foggy eyes popped open. “Oh, yeah, umm . . .” With the easy ambivalence of only the chemically sedated, after such a public bungle, he took a moment to grind his knuckles into his nostrils before he read. “Step 3. Made a decision. Made a decision to turn, to

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