



Jitter Bug, Mary Moschitto

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Just Like This

And this is how tonight should have gone:

Bones and I walk from my grandmother's cabin to the Belvidere Bridge. Once there, we rest our arms on the metal railing and watch shad swim upriver in the almost-moonlight — on their way to spawn and die. Bones (swaying from splitting three bottles of wine with me) points out the shad.

There, she says.

Yes, I say.

There.

Yes.

Then we're walking again and talking about these last three weeks (my vacation home from Idaho) and this being my last night in Pennsylvania. As we walk, our fingers dance the bridge railing, breaking spider webs, pulling leaves from sycamore trees, tapping storefront windows of Belvidere's almost empty

downtown. Then we are outside Riverview Bar, but, really, has anyone ever called Riverview anything except George's (after the owner)? So that's what we'll call it from now on — George's.

Inside, like usual, there is only George the Owner, Bones, and me. Bones and I drink Yuengling beers at the bar, one after the other because, beside Pabst, Yuengling has always been our beer. And because we need alcohol to make it through this final night.

After drinking three beers each and then doing a shot of bourbon with George the Owner, Bones and I retreat to the back of the bar to play quots. Bones is drunk but all her throws hit the slate board time and again because she lives in the slow (sad) hills of eastern Pennsylvania, where this game was created.

I throw my quots all over the bar because I'm that bottle and a half of wine into the night, and now three Yuenglings and that shot of bourbon. Or maybe my throws are all over the bar because I now live in Idaho and haven't played quots in years. Or maybe because I can only concentrate on Bones, how much thinner she is now than she was in high school (those seventeen years ago), how she now looks like a woman (is a woman) — with short dyed-blond hair replacing hairsprayed brown bangs, crow's feet in the corners of her steel-blue eyes.

And she is so much more beautiful than when she was prom queen.

After I lose two games in a row, Bones (with thin nicotine fingers) orders two more Yuenglings and slides quarters into the jukebox. She chooses, let's say, Cash and Jennings and maybe Strait. While she's picking up the beers, I add Skynyrd and Bad Company.

Bones's songs play while George the Owner watches the Jersey news with the volume low. He is wondering why he opened a bar in Belvidere and thinking how there are never good nights anymore. If I knew his thoughts, I'd sidle up to the bar and tell George the Owner (nearly yelling at him, how can he not see) that he is so, so wrong, how all we have are these nights of perfection (which is an absolute lie since I'm writing an entire

essay about the way love should have gone).

Bones's songs end and "Tuesday's Gone" begins (*Train roll on, on down the line*). Sad southern rock fills every corner of this dive bar — the humming refrigerators, the unmopped bathrooms, the long wooden bar, the empty back booths, the framed photos of '50s actors and actresses. *Means I'm leaving my woman at home*. The song makes me think about how I've been asking Bones (these past weeks) to move to Idaho, to try our hand at love one more time. (*One more time*, I say, then I say it again.)

But tonight neither of us dares to mention Bones moving to Idaho. Rather, we talk about me teaching at the University of Idaho and Idaho's Snake River, which in any telling is never as beautiful as the slack-watered Delaware that flows in front of my grandmother's cabin. We even talk about the six day canoe trip Bones and I just took.

Bones joined me for a hundred miles as I canoed from the Delaware's headwaters in New York to the brackish waters of Trenton. A trip where some nights Bones and I slept in separate tents (and it seemed as if after seventeen years of dating and breaking that everything broken was broken and everything dead was dead). Other nights, one tent remained empty as we wrapped ourselves around the other like river flowing around a rock (only the smallest eddies between us). We'd wake at dawn and swim moon-white and naked in the warm Delaware.

We can talk about my university, the Snake, and this canoe trip, but we can never say a word (not a word) about Bones moving to Idaho because we're afraid that if she decides against it tonight, then tonight will be ruined. And we need tonight. God, we need this tonight.

Or maybe we don't talk about Bones moving to Idaho because our history runs so deep that it seeps even into these manipulated memories of how tonight should have gone. After seventeen years, maybe we realize we can't make this love work for more than a few weeks.

Or maybe I realize that Bones drinks so much that I feel

like the sober one.

Or maybe she remembers those Colorado nights (my anger).

Or maybe we remember high school and college (our fights, those years of silence).

Or maybe (just maybe) we don't talk about her moving because it's easier just to dream.

Skynyrd ends with *She had to be free, and somehow I have to carry on*. A long pause lingers with the stale smoke, the stained ceiling tiles, the 60-watt bulbs that cast an ethereal light through-out the bar. In the real telling, come tomorrow I don't know which one of us will be free or which one will need to carry on (or if life can ever be as simple as a Skynyrd song). But in this telling (this one right here), "Tuesday's Gone" is no longer for or about us. The next song is.

"Feel Like Making Love" begins with that aluminum strum of guitar. I know the song is cheesy. So does Bones. Still, she hears the intro, cocks her head, says, Did you put this song on?

Yes, I reply (I try to be nonchalant).

Bones pauses, pulls a Marlboro Light to her lips, lights it. It's all so slow. Her movements. The beginning of the song. The cigarette turning to flame. The slowness gives me time to think about how I hate cigarettes, how I hate the smell of them. Always have. Always will. But I have also always loved the taste of ash in Bones' mouth. Always loved her taste of ash.

Bones smiles thinly (maybe sadly), as if she's weighed down by memories, and asks, Do you remember that this was our high school song?

And all of this (all of it) is true.

Yes; I say (thinking about seventeen long years ago). I think about Bones and me passing notes at school (hers folded into tight little shapes), me giving her my wrestling jacket, her buying two jigsaw puzzle necklaces that when put together say True Love. My half sits in my mother's attic in a small box.

Bones' half, maybe she threw it away. But in this telling, Bones

keeps her necklace in her top dresser drawer besides her socks. The random days when she notices it, she runs her fingers over the cheap gold coating, untangles the knotted chain.

Bones ashes her cigarette and takes my hand softly in hers. I think she's going to kiss it (and that is all I want in this new world). We are drunk and smiling and Bad Company is singing our song, *When I think about you, I think about love*.

I start to think about all the times that Bones and I have broken up — the first where I broke up with her (she dry heaved from sadness), the second when she broke up with me (I moved to Colorado), the times I watched her drive from my grandmother's cabin (her taillights disappearing), the angry fights, the slow last kisses — until we are here and we are now at George's and we might be dating or we might not be dating but I've invited Bones to Idaho and she hasn't said no so we must be doing something. *Feel like making love*.

What's funny is that in high school when we dated, Bones and I were both virgins. And I've never thought about this, but I can't remember when we first made love. If I'm going to create this night the way it should have been, then I need to be at George's thinking about our first love-making together: Thirteen years ago, I am twenty-one. Bones nineteen. We've already broken up twice. Had sex with others (though we both wish we had waited for the other). We are so young and haven't talked in a year, but I call her and we (of course) meet to canoe the Delaware. I am amazed with how beautiful she looks. Brown hair in a ponytail. Her face thinner. For the first time ever she smokes a cigarette in front of me. We paddle, float, talk for an hour — it is night and a thin fog hovers just off the river. Then we return to my grandmother's cabin where we drink Pabst until one of us, her, yes, her, says, There are some things even the river cannot change. I ask, Yes? She says, Yes. I repeat, Yes? She says, Shut up, says, Kiss me.

Yes, that's the way our first love-making should have gone.

Back in this tonight, Bad Company sings, *Darling, if I live*

without you, I live without love so gently as Bones runs her fingers over my calluses, feeling every one. She wraps her hand around my ring finger and pulls into her mouth — I don't mind. She closes her mouth as if she's going to suck on my finger. I feel her tongue, rough and tickling. This is just what I want; this is just how it went. Then Bones presses down her teeth and begins to bite. It hurts (just like we have hurt each other for all our years together). Like those years, I close my eyes, try not to jerk.

And I want to change this biting to a soft kiss, a long, sensual sucking. But I can't. Whether or not I like the biting, it is Bones. And it is me. It is us.

And thank god I'm drunk because Bones is biting as hard as Bad Company's pounding guitar (her teeth digging into my flesh). Bad Company almost screaming, *Feel like making love*. My eyes shut. Pounding guitar. Bones still biting.

And we cannot change a thing. Not one goddamn thing.

Bad Company almost screaming, *Feel like making love*.

Bones biting. Me squeezing the table with my other hand. Stiffening my legs. Gritting my teeth.

Then the guitar quiets. The singer hushes. Bones slows her biting, begins running her tongue over my finger. She pulls my finger from her mouth.

And Bones, she is golden (golden) with barlight and beer. I pull a slug from my Yuengling and look at my finger; it's bleeding. In one week (and in two), I'll rub the scab to remember what love felt like. Within a month, I'll try to remember which finger it was (This one? That one?). When I return to the cabin a year from now, I'll wonder so many things.

I smile and show Bones the blood. Her face drops, and she looks lost. She begins to bite her finger. And me, I love the pain Bones gives me; it reminds me that we're (maybe tonight and all those seventeen years before) in something that someone (maybe me) would call love. But the pain Bones causes herself — that abortion, those drugs — or the pain I cause her — the break ups, those drunk fights — that I cannot handle. I grab her wrist gently, say softly, Bones, say Please, say, Stop.

And why, if I am re-creating this night, don't I just make everything beautiful? No drunkenness. No biting. No silences about her moving to Idaho or staying in Pennsylvania. Just she and I on the Delaware in a canoe (or maybe again skinny dipping) talking about love and how it lasts forever (for goddamn ever). About how she needs to pack up this and give away that. Say goodbye to him and get a last drink with her. How she'll join me within the month. Even before autumn. Before the leaves are on the ground. I can wait that long. I can wait.

But I can't re-create this night in a way that is all full of perfection because some clothes fit and others don't. In this story (our story), biting and drunkenness and silence (and even a long, slow destruction) are old jeans worn every day by the two of us.

As our song ends, Bones pulls her finger from her mouth. And since our Yuenglings are shot (and scattered across the table), my finger's bleeding, and we're staggering drunk, we do the only thing we know to do — we buy a sixer of Pabst. In the real night, it was actually Busch Light, but fuck Busch. I only bought Busch because George the Owner was out of Pabst.

With out sixer, Bones and I sway into our night and cross the Belvidere Bridge. Tonight, this world is perfectly still. Perfectly. Still. The shad no longer run. The midnight bullfrogs — even they are quiet.

Once back at the cabin, Bones and I sit at the top of the shale riverbank. Below, the river runs wide and black. Bones brushes hair from her face and pulls my finger to her mouth. I grit my teeth, ready. But she kisses my cut once, twice. She then leans into my chest, and I think she's going to snuggle (and cannot think of one more beautiful thing) but she begins biting (again). This time through the collar of the Hot Dog Johnnies tee shirt that my mother bought me today. Once through, Bones rips the shirt, top to bottom. Pull-tear, pull-tear, pull-tear.

And all of this, it is true, true — true.

It's, what, maybe 3 a.m. and I'm trashed, so who knows what I say, probably, What the fuck? Or maybe I sing lyrics from

my new favorite song — I'm gonna to walk around and drink some more. I'm gonna to walk around and drink some more — as I walk along the river's edge. But in this telling (in this singular telling), I look at the river and say, Yes.

Bones stares at the water (glass-like and perfect) and she says, Yes.

After seventeen years, that is all we need. Bones removes her cutoffs, underwear, flannel, black tee shirt. She hasn't worn a bra in years. Her shoulders wide, waist thin, small bone-white breasts.

I remove my pants and boxers. Bones (so gently) removes my torn tee, folds it, and places it on a flat rock. She (so gently) rubs my beard (speckled with a gray that she's never seen until this trip home).

Then Bones and I descend the steep bank past honey-suckle and milkweed (and untended and hungry weeds) to the river for the last time before I leave for Idaho in six hours.

The beach is rough with shale; the beach is smooth with soft sand.

The Delaware (warm, not yet autumn) laps at our toes.

A step in, and the river (so gently) swallows our ankles.

A step in, and the river (so gently) swallows are knees.

A step in, and the river (so gently) swallows are hips.

(We, so gently, disappear.)

Once the water is to our chests, we swim. And as we swim, Bones kisses me like a drunken angel (a fucking angel) — long and hard — and she leans tight against my chest as she and I swim into the river (into the night), above silent riverstones staring up at us.

All of this is true, all true —

Even the lies and the mis-remembered parts. Even the drunk ramblings and the myths. Even the dreams and all our desperate hopes.

— Even these are true.

And when it's some middle of the night hour and I'm this drunk and swimming, I always dream of sinking (so gently)

to the muddy bottom where I love the black quiet. I imagine never coming up (surrounded forever by a calmness I've never felt above water).

But when I surface, Bones is there (always treading water). And, this, this is how our tonight should have gone. Just like this.

Just like this — Bones and I scissor-kick, and hold one another as a swan-white moon breaks the leaves of an elm.

I whisper, Yes?

With the river stock-still, Bones knows what I mean.

(Just what I mean.)

Yes, she whispers. Just like this.

Even tomorrow, when you're sober?

Though we're swimming, the river is unbroken.

Yes. A whisper.

Like this.

Our kicks, not a ripple.

This.

Yes.

Bones and I stop treading water, stop scissor-kicking, and still holding each other, we begin to sink (so gently). Shoulders. Necks. Chins.

Before our lips break the waterline I say, I want to kiss you.

Bones whispers, How do you read my mind?

In this telling, Yes.

The river stops

its flow to the Atlantic.

The elms, maples, sycamores — bend around us in a sweet embrace.

The night geese offer not a single honk.

The moon, full and fat, crests

the Kittatinny hills and showers us

in a bone-white light

as Bones and I sink —

our lips, noses, foreheads — into the warmth

of the Delaware, to that dark, silty riverbottom.

Just like this.

Yes.

Just like this.

And this is how love goes.

Idaho winters long and lonely. Rain for days then a midnight snow that melts come morning. Through this slop and wetness, I bike to the university for another day of teaching.

And Bones, she's in Pennsylvania, pounding nails for a living. She sleeps in a new apartment in a new bed that I've never slept in. And she refuses my phone calls. Only returning them when she's drunk and can tell me heart stories that make me think of water (about how all of this should have gone). Her sober days, I don't hear from her for months, though I leave messages, sometimes my own drunken ramblings (I say, Please move to Idaho. Then I say it again.). She never even visits.

I write this as if all of this failure is a shock. As if I expected something else. But in every telling (every fucking telling) I knew this is how it had to end. After seventeen years, I'm still not sure why (it always has to end this way or how I know it will end this way).

But then one morning (maybe this very morning, today, just at dawn, after another night I could not sleep), I realize our night skinny-dipping in the Delaware was seven months ago (or thirteen months ago or now nineteen). Still, every bitter dawn, I think of how she's not here. And when I date other women — and that never works — I think of Bones. When I drink a Pabst or hear someone talk of Yuenglings, I think of Bones.

I think of Bones. Bones. I think of Bones.

And this morning and yesterday and last month and five months ago, I realize that I need to put this all away. I need to quit thinking of what should have been (or how it could have gone). And with a wipe of the hands, I do. And just like that (just like that), I'm over her. She's gone, and I am absolutely fucking fine and absolutely fucking free and my smile is as wide as the sun (or so I tell myself time and again).

Still, this morning I bike to campus (bone chilled) past

the bar I drank at last night — John's Alley — and think how it's never had any other name. And as I peddle, I think of how I want to drink a beer and not wish it were a Yuengling. How I want to look at these fingers and not summon scars. How I want to swim and not sink alone to the quiet darkness of a riverbed at midnight. And when I break the surface of these thoughts, Bones is not there (she's never treading water). It's just me (just me) and I'm still pedaling my way to school. And love, you know — god, sometimes you just need to dream. Sometimes you just need to forget. Sometimes you just need to dream.

And this is how love goes.

Just like this.

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