

In the Present

By Miles Ryan Fisher

So I did the only other thing I could think to do: I kissed her.

I'd been with Sam for what, a month? And she was so free and fresh out of college. I mean, that girl broke into the world around her as if she wanted to consume everything all at once. *I live in the present*. That was her line. Almost like she wore it as some sort of bright red name tag that said 'Hi My Name Is' and in the white space below it she wrote "*Samantha and I live in the present.*" It appeared to be her mantra, something she'd want inscribed on her gravestone. I'd never thought about a mantra for myself, but I knew if I had to come up with something to be remembered by, that wouldn't have been it.

She twirled in the middle of the bar, her mid-length dress gliding imprinted flowers through the air before she came to a stop with her back to her friends and her round face smiling at me. "Hi! I'm Samantha," she said.

"Nice to meet you. I'm South."

"South! I *love* that name."

"Thanks. I kind of like it, too. Do you always go by Samantha or do you sometimes go by Sam?"

"Both. But you're gonna have to get to know me a little bit better if you're gonna be calling me Sam."

"What if I want to get to know you a lot bit better? What do I get to call you then?"

"Your fuck buddy."

"But you'd still call me South, right?"

"Well, I wouldn't say I'd be *calling* you South. More like screaming it."

I laughed. She had wit, I had to give her that. She had spunk. I had to give her that, too. And she had a pair of tits pressing against the inside of her dress as if they were trying to rip its seams apart and liberate her cleavage. I didn't have to give her that. God gave her that.

Later in the night Sam gave *me* something. She grabbed my hand and scrawled her phone number on the back of it with a pen she'd snatched off the bar.

"Aren't you forgetting something?" she asked.

"Forgetting what?"

She gripped the front of my shirt and pulled me into her open mouth. Her tongue twisted around mine, and her long curly brown hair tickled my cheeks. The glitter around her grayish-blue eyes rubbed onto my face as I was thinking about how lucky I was ... and that I would only get luckier.

We didn't spend that first night together, but it didn't take long for *that* to happen—beginning with the very next night, to be exact. We went out in my part of the city, a low-rent area in Philadelphia called Brewerytown. After all, you don't make much coaching baseball for a community college (even though it was a great position for me to be in considering I was twenty-seven years old).

Brewerytown did put me close to Fairmount Park, though. It was a sprawling park, one of the largest in the world, I think. You name it, it had it. Baseball and softball fields, bike trails through wooded areas, pier-side fishing (not that you'd want to eat anything you caught in the Schuylkill), and even a Frisbee golf course. It also had wide open fields that turned into rolling

hills, and we met up on one of those hills where *Breakfast at Tiffany's* was playing. It was one of the first outdoor movies of the late spring, and Sam insisted we just *had* to see it together.

We found each other just as the movie started. We laid out a blanket, and as the movie ran, we drank wine, smoked cigarettes, kissed each other without worrying about the people around us—having what Audrey Hepburn would say was a *glorious* time living in the present. After the film ended, we started walking down West Oxford Street, talking about ...

“Well that was a dumb ass way to end the movie,” I said.

“How could you *not* like that ending?” Sam said. “He finally got her in the end.”

“Which I’m sure was the way Hollywood needed it to be.”

“Well if it makes any difference to you, he doesn’t get her in the book. She ends up leaving, and he never sees her again.”

“And I think *that* is just as dumb.”

“I doubt Truman Capote cares what you think.”

“Well first off, he’s dead, Sam. So I don’t think he *can* care at this point.”

“*That's uncalled for.*”

“No—what’s uncalled for is an ending where a guy like Paul what’s-his-face even *tries* to get a girl like Holly Golightly. Because that would never happen. A guy that down-to-earth *doesn't* pursue a girl that flimsy. At least, not in the end he doesn’t. Wait—where are we going?”

“Back to your place.”

“How do you know where my place is?”

“Well you’d tell me if I were going the wrong way, wouldn’t you?”

So she took me back to my place, and the moment we got in my apartment, she shoved me against the hallway wall and kicked the door shut. She pressed her body against mine, her lips hovering for just a second, just a brief smile, before plunging into me, the back of my head smacking the wall. I pushed back, shoving her across the hallway and slipping my hand behind her head so that when she hit the opposite wall, her head wouldn’t strike it, too.

I lifted her dress—another one with imprinted flowers in full bloom—up and over her head, and it came off much easier than I’d expected. I unhooked her bra, pulled her panties down until they dropped to her toes, and soon we were lying on the stained hardwood floor. We didn’t even make it to the bedroom. Or the couch.

“Slower,” she panted. “Go slower.”

Slower, I thought. *I can go slower. I can make this last a little longer.*

The very moment it was over, she sighed. “I *love* sex,” she said.

Now, I don’t know who says that after having sex with someone for the first time, but then again it wasn’t terrible to see where the girl stood on the matter. I mean, at least I knew the option was always there.

It wasn’t just our late nights that filled up—our days filled up, too. We sent messages back and forth. Not short, wimpy, throw-away messages, but full, heavy, well-crafted conversations. We tackled questions like what we’d want our funerals to be like and where we’d volunteer if we had to do so outside of the country for a whole year and how the worst broken hearts of our lives came about (two years ago when I got cut after my second season in the minor leagues, I told her ... which wasn’t exactly true).

One day, I sat there reading and re-reading an email from Sam. The vocabulary she used, the language with its mixture of *italics* and exclamation points! and ALL CAPS (we DO have such *wonderful* repartee, don’t we Southie!)—it was all so vibrant, all so very Sam. I could just picture her sitting there at her work desk, stacks of novels piled all around her—novels written

by 20th century American authors that she poured over as part of her year-long fellowship. I imagined her nimble fingers dancing over the keyboard as if they were a bunch of merry little Pranksters hopping off their bus.

I tried to send similar messages back, though she recognized something a little different about my messages. ‘You use A LOT of ellipses. You know that, Southie?’ she wrote.

I wrote her back. ‘Maybe because there’s something more on my mind ...’

Minutes later I got a text. *I can’t wait to fuck your mind out tonight. Period. No ellipsis.*

So she fucked my mind out, and I fucked her mind out, and ...

“I’ve got an idea,” she said afterward. She unwedged her hands from beneath her pillow and propped herself up on the bed. Her curly hair draped over her shoulders, some of it swinging in front of her chest, some of it lying across her bare back. “I’ll call out sick so we can go hiking tomorrow. It’s supposed to be gorgeous out.”

“Tomorrow? But I got a game to coach. You know the season doesn’t end for another couple weeks.”

“But your game isn’t until later. Come on Southie, live a little!”

“It’s just that—”

“It’s just that what. We can go hiking, then to your game, and then make dinner together.”

“You don’t have to come to my game.”

“I know I don’t have to. I want to.”

“Besides, it’s boring. Since I gotta get there early, you’ll have to be there for pregame and then all nine innings. How about we go hiking, I go to my game, and then we’ll cook dinner together and watch a movie. Maybe even kiss a little?”

“I think we’ll do a *little* more than a *little*.” Sam planted a kiss on me. Her teeth clung to my bottom lip before letting go.

In the morning we drove to Wissahickon Valley Park, a place where baby rapids cut right through it before settling into a lake downstream. On the way there, we stopped at a grocery store to pick up a few things for the hike. We also picked up some other things for later that night after I got home from my game. Nothing that needed to be refrigerated, just some pasta, some sauce, a whole assortment of vegetables. We set our items down on the conveyor belt that fed into the bony hands of an old lady at the cash register.

“Looks like you two are cooking a little something up,” she said.

“We’re cooking a *lot* of something up,” Sam said. She peered at the lady’s nametag.

“Patty.”

Patty blushed. A lady in her sixties, and Sam had made her blush. She laid her hand on her chest. “What it’d be like to feel young again.” She reached down and started scanning the first of our things, then turned to bag them.

“Send them down,” I said. “We can bag them ourselves.”

Sam raced down to the end. “I bet I can bag better than you can.”

“There’s no *way* you can.”

“I think Patty can be the judge of that.”

Patty chuckled. “I certainly can, my dear.” She scanned our groceries, and as they rode the conveyor belt down to us, we jockeyed for our prime choices. Sam checked me with her hips to throw me off-balance, and I flung myself back at her. I pulled her arm back and she swatted me away. All along, Patty scanned and smiled.

We packed our plastic bags and lifted them onto the area where the items collected. My bag held strong, while Sam's toppled over, a jar of pasta sauce falling over and some vegetables spilling out.

"See, Sam? No chance. You should've gone for the pasta boxes. They're more stable."

"I think he cheated, Patty."

I laughed. "We both know I'm no cheater, Patty."

"He's right, Patty." Sam ran her fingers through the front of my hair. "He just can't resist me. Can you, Southie."

Patty laughed. "Where are you two off to, anyway?"

"We're headed down to Wissahicken Valley," I said.

"Well you have yourselves a delightful time."

"So," I looked down at my bag standing strong, "I won, right?"

"He just *always* has to win," Sam said.

Patty smiled. "They're all like that, honey. You just have to let them believe it."

After we paid, I picked up both bags.

"I can carry my *own* bag," Sam said and reached for one of them. I turned my body and held the bags away from her.

"Can you please tell her that chivalry isn't dead?" I asked Patty.

"Oh honey, let him show you he cares."

"I already know he does," Sam said. "But I'll let him show me anyway."

"Have a wonderful time, you two. Thanks for brightening my day."

"You, too, Patty," we said in unison.

Sam didn't know this, but my very first job was in a grocery store. So not only did I know how to pack a bag tightly, but I also knew that older ladies worked the light, off-time shifts as a way to feel productive, a part of things, like they were still worth something. I looked at Sam and she smiled at me as if she could tell. It was a time like this when her personality really shined. She slid her arm through mine and kept it linked to me as we skipped out of the grocery store.

Once we got to the park, we packed what we needed into my backpack and headed toward the trails. We took one of the free brochures sitting in a box on a wood post and unfolded it to open up all the trails zig-zagging through the park.

"What path should we take?" I asked Sam, my hand holding one edge of the map, her hand holding the other.

"Let's take *all* of them."

"We should probably do it on all of them."

"Oh I've already done that," she said without looking up from the map until I didn't respond. "That was a joke, Southie."

"You're funny. Which one do you want to take."

"Obviously the one that leads to the lake."

She skipped ahead of me, her tight black pants stretched over her ass, holding it there like a perfectly wrapped present. I raised my eyes from her ass, up her back, and to her neck where a little knot held up her bikini top. And I imagined how strong that little knot must be to hold everything in place.

As we hiked, we dove headfirst into conversation, the same kind of conversations we'd send each other during the day.

“I *really* don’t think you’re giving Roth his due credit, South,” she said. “The man was one of the renowned American authors of the late-1900s. *Portnoy’s Complaint*. *Zuckerman Bound*. You tell me who else could write with such flow. He pretty much controlled the English language like it was his bitch.”

“That’s the *point*, Sam. Roth treated everything like it was his bitch. I don’t care how engaging his voice can be, it doesn’t have an ounce of genuine in it. Where’s the value in *that*?”

“Well *I* like him. When it comes to language, he lived like a lion.”

Benito Mussolini said that. *It is better to live one day as a lion than one hundred years as a sheep*. She casually quoted a *dictator* who’d casually discarded thousands of human beings, probably not even realizing it because Benito Mussolini wasn’t a 20th century American author. Just after she said this, I started eyeing—or at least, I started to notice that *she* was eyeing—some guy who was hiking about twenty yards away from us. We continued to climb on parallel paths, and she kept looking over.

“That guy is really moving. He looks like he’s pretty fit,” she said to me.

“You should go introduce yourself.”

“Maybe I’ll do more than introduce myself.”

“You’re funny.”

“Southie, I’m just joking,” she said, because you know, that’s something that you joke about with the guy you’re seeing. “You take things too seriously sometimes.”

Eventually our paths diverged and we continued along, hiking up some rocky parts and then squeezing down through a few crevices. Sam wasn’t fast, but she was able to handle it. She had the strength to hoist her own weight when it needed raising and support it when it needed lowering. A few times I tried to give her my hand, but she insisted that she didn’t need it.

“Ooh let’s go for a swim!” she said once the lake appeared, just an easy descent away.

The moment we touched down on the small bank, I dropped my bag and we kicked off our shoes. Sam took off her tank top and sprinted into the water, splashing until she got deep enough to dunk her head. She wiped her eyes and pushed back her hair before slapping her hands down on the water. “Come on!”

I yanked my shirt off and ran, swimming up to her so that I could plant a kiss on her and undo the knot behind her neck in one motion. While I was undoing that knot, she went ahead and undid the one behind her back for me so that she was free, I was free, everything about us was free. We were together, in the present. After we made out and splashed around for a little while, I figured what better to add to the moment than a little alcohol.

“You want to break open the wine?” I asked.

“That sounds lovely, my dear. How *I shall* condescend.”

I unzipped my bag, spreading a towel on the sandy bank, pouring some red wine in a couple half-classy plastic cups, setting some cheese on a paper plate.

“To such a fine day together,” Sam said, holding her cup between two fingers, the rest of her fingers splayed out as if what she held was made of crystal. “We do have such wonderful times, don’t we.”

“That we do.” I smiled and clinked her cup. She tilted back her wine, and as she drank, her eyes peered at me with a little smirk on her face.

“What,” I asked.

She cocked her head. “I think,” she leaned toward me, “I think I’m falling in love with you.”

So I did the only thing I could think to do: I leaned toward her, traveling the distance between us to lay a wet-with-wine kiss on her lips. It sure was a good way to make her think I

believed the words she said. Because let's be honest, an in-the-present girl like Sam doesn't know what love is.

After our little picnic, we hiked back to the parking lot, and I ducked into the public bathroom as the wine ran through me. While I was in there I spent time thinking about how we'd just taken a day lumped in the middle of the week and transformed it into something fun—even if it was just a day of moments. Gallivanting around, laughing, kissing, smiling. And the best part about it was that we still had the night.

When I came out of the bathroom, a sharp pang, the sick kind that really digs in there, stuck me in the stomach. Sam's hand flapped through the air as she chatted, her other hand on her hip pushing the opposite hip toward the very guy we'd seen during our hike. She laughed at something he said and pushed him on the shoulder. I hated every step I took as I walked toward them.

“Hey!” Sam exclaimed, like she was excited to see me. “South, you need to meet Julian.” I shook his hand.

“Would you believe that he and I actually have a friend in common?”

Of course I'd believe that, Sam.

“It's true! He and I know someone through work who . . .”

But I stopped listening to her. I just nodded my head to make it look like I did as she just kept flirting with that guy right in my face. I started planning out when I was going to have it out with her. I'd go coach the game. Come back and we'd cook dinner. And then I'd get a little drunk and launch into her about this. Just because we weren't going to last forever doesn't mean you go around flirting this way and that when the person standing next to you is the one you claim to be in love with.

By the time I got home from coaching (which I was *really* glad to have done by myself lest she flirt with some of the players on my team), Sam wanted to go to the bar instead of making dinner with all the groceries we'd bought.

“Come on, South,” she said. “My friends just texted me, they want to see us.”

“What about dinner?”

“We can eat later.”

“That's not what I mean. I thought we were going to spend time cooking together.” *And I was going to go off on you.*

“We can do that tomorrow night. Besides, it's not like we won't be together tonight.” She put her hands on my hips and drew me closer. “And later I'll make sure you don't go hungry.”

So we headed to the Trope, our usual bar that—true to its literary name—had wooden shelves packed with old books lining its walls, making it feel like you were inside someone's private library. You could take the books off the shelves, flip through them, breathe in the mustiness of the pages that were turning dull shades of yellow. But the chipped woodwork and peeling plaster walls were far too damaged and divey to make the bar anything as pretentious as a private library. Those who patronized it were for the most part approachable, something that Sam and I loved.

The Trope was relatively crowded for a weekday night, enough that you couldn't see all the faces in the bar at first glance. We maneuvered our way through until we ran into a couple of her girlfriends.

“How was hiking?” one of them asked.

“It was alright,” I told her and shrugged. “We hiked all over the trails and drank a bottle of wine and swam in the creek.”

“I wish I had a guy to do that with,” she said.

“There are guys all *over* the place,” Sam said as she held her arms out. “Look around!” She started pointing out different guys in the bar as I stared at the walls, feeling like a book that could be shoved back on one of the shelves just as easily as it was plucked from it.

“I’m gonna go get some drinks,” I said, though I don’t know if she heard me.

I went up to the bar and looked to Brad the bartender, who had his back turned as he reached for a bottle from the shelf stocked full of colorful liquor bottles that sat below a long, horizontal mirror spanning it. But I didn’t want any of that liquor. What I wanted was some cheap bottle of beer that I could throw back until I was drunk enough to air my grievances. I avoided my reflection in the mirror by looking down the bar toward the far end at the little area where small clusters of people always gathered. And that’s when I saw her amidst the crowd. Joey. My college girlfriend from four years ago. My stomach clenched as it always did when I ran into her, maybe once or twice a year in the two years since I’d moved back. Joey’s eyes looked up and traveled directly into mine. And all I could think was, *Shit*.

By the time Brad noticed me and slid me my beer, Joey was standing right behind me.

“Hey South,” she said in a small voice that crept into my name as if it belonged there.

I turned and nodded back toward the bar. “You want anything?”

“No, I’m okay thanks.” She tilted her drink toward me, her fingers wrapped around a bottle of beer. Her straight, dark brown hair was tucked up (as always) so that it didn’t fall onto her shoulders or the t-shirt she wore. I wanted to ask her what she was doing here, but before I could, there it was on her hand, hanging down by her worn jeans. The piercing gleam of an engagement ring. Given to her by a guy she never talked about and I’d never met.

The sounds of the bar faded. Not just into a din of white noise, but into no noise at all. I couldn’t even hear the noise of Sam a few feet away.

“Congratulations, Jo,” I said.

“Oh,” she looked down at the ring and gave a half-smile. “Thanks.”

“You have a date set?”

“Not yet. I’m too exhausted to worry about it right now. You know, just getting through another school year.”

“But you love the kids no matter *how* much energy they suck out of you. Then when it comes time for them to move on ...”

She laughed. “I always get too attached to them. Then once summer’s here I have trouble letting go.”

“And I’m sure they have trouble letting *you* go, too.”

She shrugged.

“No seriously, you *know* those kids adore you. You’re probably one of the teachers they’ll remember most.”

“So what about you,” she said. “What have you been up to?”

“Still coaching baseball. Wrapping up another season.”

“I still can’t get over it.”

My heart thumped.

“You coaching college kids,” she continued, “I wish I could see it.”

“Oh. Oh yeah, you definitely *should* come to a game. The kids are fun as hell. Still have some growing up to do, but a fun group for sure. I just keep trying to set them straight. You know, teaching them the things I didn’t know. Not just about baseball, but about life.”

“Sounds like *you* should be a teacher.”

“Oh no way, Jo. I might enjoy coaching, but I don’t have what it takes to do what you do.”

That’s when Sam stepped in, injecting herself into *our* conversation. She ran her fingertips down my arm, the way she’d do late at night when I was trying to fall asleep. “Hey sweetheart, who is this?”

Sweetheart. Who is *this*? “This is Joey,” I said. “Joey, this is Sam.” I didn’t attach a qualifier to Sam’s name. I didn’t want to.

“Nice to meet you, Joey!”

“Nice to meet you, too.”

“*There’s* my drink.”

“Oh, sorry,” I said. But before I could get those two whole words out of my mouth, Sam grabbed the vodka tonic from my hand and brought the straw to her mouth, sucking away at it.

“So Joey,” she said with the straw still in her mouth, “how do you know Southie?”

“We’re … old friends. From college. How about you?”

“We’re fuck buddies.” She giggled. I looked at Joey and Joey looked at me, our expressions saying the same thing—who is *this*?

“Good for you,” was all Joey could find to say in return.

“Great for me. Although it means you’re always relying on someone. And if they aren’t there, well who knows what happens.”

I didn’t look at Joey again because I knew she’d be looking back at me. I could feel her eyes crawling up my neck, which made me shift my head and stretch to stave off a shiver.

“I guess anything can happen,” Joey said.

“The world is your oyster, that’s what I say. So what is it you do?”

“I teach second grade.”

“A teacher—that’s *so* noble of you.”

Heat prickled my face, and I wanted to escape it any way I could without being obvious. I knew Sam would never notice, but with Joey, she’d know exactly what I was doing.

“I’ve got to run to the bathroom real quick. God my bladder’s killing me.” It was all I could think of. A fleeting fix that I knew wouldn’t fix anything. Leaving them alone, I knew the conversation would continue to devolve. But I didn’t know how I could extricate Sam from Joey without saying a quick goodbye to Joey, the one thing I could never do.

So I headed toward the bathroom, feeling Joey’s eyes follow me as I’m sure Sam prattled on without noticing a thing. I wondered what kind of eyes they were. Were they disapproving? Were they upset? Were they *desperate*?

I stood in front of the urinal, staring at my piss flowing down the back side of it and disappearing into the drain until I was empty and another guy came into the bathroom. Since the lone stall was taken, I zipped up and shifted over to the sink so I could continue staring. The problem was that this time when I stared, what stared back was—me. A slightly curved crack cut through the mirror above the sink, splitting my forehead and driving straight through the space between my eyes. And that’s when I stopped thinking about Joey’s eyes and started thinking about my own. What were *my* eyes upon me? Were *they* disapproving? Were *they* upset? Were *they* *desperate*?

But I knew the answer to all of these questions, and I didn’t want to face it. I wanted to stand there in the bathroom forever, letting other guys by and saying, “Oh don’t mind me,” as I stood there in close quarters while they relieved themselves wondering what my problem was. Then maybe I’d tell them my problem. Maybe I’d lead them out of the bathroom and *show* them

my problem. But it'd be no use. They'd think it was typical. Cliché, even. The uncomfortable experience of having to introduce your current girl to one of your exes. But this dug far deeper than that, so far that it left Sam on the surface as I traveled closer to the lump that sat in my stomach.

I splashed some water on my face, patted it dry, and sucked my breath in as if I were treading water in a diving tank and had to fetch something that was sitting at the bottom, fifteen feet below. I was no more than a few steps out of the bathroom when I started gasping for more air.

Joey stood there, very still. She no longer held her beer. Instead, she held her hands in front of her stomach, her right hand wrapped over her left hand—and the engagement ring that was on it.

“We need to talk.”

“It’s not like I don’t know, Jo.”

“Then why are you with her?”

I didn’t have an answer. At least, not one that I knew would suffice.

“You didn’t leave me for this,” her small voice said.

I stared at her, taken aback by what she said. Processing it a little too long, I guess.

“You didn’t leave me for this,” she said again.

“You’re getting *married*, Jo.”

“It doesn’t *matter*, South.” She calmed the sudden frown on her face. “It doesn’t matter, South.”

I looked up at the little crevice where the bar’s two walls met the ceiling. It *does* matter, I thought.

“Just because I’m getting married doesn’t mean I don’t care about you. Look at me. South, look at me. And I hope … I really hope you didn’t leave me to be with someone,” she glanced in Sam’s direction, “like *that*.”

It wasn’t fair. How could she be so humble as to take herself down like that? How could she be so caring, so filled with kindness that it overflowed into my lap? Yet I was the one who’d walked away from it all, not really interested in a long distance relationship with her after college. Now here we were. And the truth was, I’d never really left.

I looked to Sam, her energy whirling around some guy I didn’t recognize as she sucked on the straw that sunk into the drink I’d given her.

I looked back at Joey, who just stood there, her plain brown eyes still fixed on mine, her lips showing no hint of movement.

I didn’t move either. *I still love you* sat thick, lodged like a grenade in my throat, its safety pin pulled, its spark ignited, its fuse burning. And I had seconds to decide which one of us it would kill.

So I did the only other thing I could think to do.