Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Burnt House

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AND HER NAME WAS JANIS JOPLIN

I can remember when it was that I first really started loving her music. Janis Joplin. When her music began to mean so much to me. It feels like it was around a hundred years ago, like I've always loved her stuff. But when did it start happening for me? It was right before high school and I'd gone out to the college to see these dancers. And I was one of the youngest kids in the audience. I had my mom drive me there and there was this really cool older couple that I met afterwards. He was an economics professor and she taught grade school and we just stayed in the lobby and talked and talked. Like, *really* talked. Stuff that no kids in my class would ever want to talk about, you know? No bullshit, no stupid stuff.

And they did it: That couple really turned me on to Janis and they loved her and told me about her albums and how she lived and suffered and died. And they told me about her songs and I started listening. Really listening. *Cheap Thrills*. "Down on Me." I'd look at pictures of her and think that maybe we looked alike.

She did just what she wanted to do with her life. She *did* it and she got out of her stupid little town in Texas and did just what she wanted to do and sang her music. I read what she meant to people and I almost cried.

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Me and Sherry found some of these old, weird clothes that used to belong to her grandmother. It was really cool stuff and Sherry had this huge mirror in her bedroom and we'd try on all these old clothes and blast some music. Just having a great time, music up really loud. And then once she flicked her cigarette in the garbage can and started a fire! The cigarette was still lit, as it turned out. We freaked! The flames shot out and burned the wall and part of the carpet and we had to call the fire department. All the neighbors came out to watch and her parents came home and were *mad as shit*! So afterwards we all started calling Sherry's house "burnt house." Me and Gina would be like, "Let's go to burnt house," or "Did you leave your album at burnt house?"

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Sometimes people messed with me in eighth grade but at Leedsville High they just sort of left you alone. If I try to talk about a book I like or music that's not AM bullshit, some people will stare at me or some cheerleader will laugh, but so what? *So what*.

I always get into this really cool rap with the people at Shoresounds, the record store at the mall, and I'll always hang around there and look at the new albums or talk about what's good, or I'll go and see stuff over at the college. And then there was the time that I was with Chuck. For a while it was the coolest thing, listening to all his albums, riding around on his motorcycle. But Chuck turned out to be a real fucking jerk. I don't even talk to him anymore.

I can tell Sid all sorts of stuff. He always listens. Anything I say at all, Sid always listens and thinks it over. But he's so quiet! So quiet…sometimes I wonder if he's really bored, but mostly I think he likes hearing all the crazy stuff I say. And of course he *does* speak too.

I loved Latin class last year. I did pretty well in Latin, sitting in the back of the room, keeping quiet. It was this really small class, just ten of us or so, but sometimes we'd all talk and I told them about Chuck. I was going out with him then and I told them about riding around on his bike and everybody loved hearing that: Patty, the motorcycle chick. And they all teased me about that, but then I realized something. I realized…I'd never really been *teased* before. It sounds funny, but I really liked it. Teasing is sort of friendly. I've been messed with and also left alone, but never really *teased*, you know? Of course, with Gina and Sherry it was different: We'd tease each other all the time and give each other shit, but we were all friends. In Latin it wasn't like I was getting made fun of. Nobody wanted to hurt me. It was friendly.

Later, after I got to know Sid really well, I ran that by him: the difference between getting made fun of and getting teased. And he listened carefully and thought about what I'd said. He took what I said really seriously, like he always did. He would never tease me. (But sometimes I wish he would.)



HELL

My father took off when I was like two or three. I was really little and I don't remember having a father at all. Not really. Like, I'll have these flashes of memory about him, but that's it. There's one picture of the three of us in front of his truck. I'm a baby and the picture is of us picking blueberries in Hammonton. My mom never lets up on him: the husband who left, the father who ran out on us, the skunk. That's her word: *skunk*.

She works as a cashier in this beauty shop *near* the point, the shittier part of Leedsville. And she'll always say that she works near the point and not in the point. Like it makes any kind of difference at all or means anything or makes her better. Jesus Christ!

All day long she works at the cash register and talks to all the ladies who come in, and she knows them all and spends half her time complaining about my father, who split from us like a million years ago. To my mom it happened just yesterday. "I never saw a penny from that man." "Do you think that he ever offered to help with the household expensives?" *Expensives*. Stuff that I've heard a million times. And she'll make that face, like she's smelled something really bad, and then she'll take another drag of her cigarette. And when my copy of *Karousel* comes in the mail she'll make

that face too. “Your rock magazine’s here,” she’ll tell me.

I always read *Karousel* all the way through, everything, even the Doctor’s Bag, the advice column. Man, some of the letters! There was this one guy who moved to a new town and he was new in school and he couldn’t make any friends. He would come straight home from school and go right to his room and play music. All by himself, lying on his bed and listening to music and thinking about killing himself. Then there was a letter from this guy who felt funny because his dick was crooked. It pointed to a weird angle. The doctor told him not to worry.

MOUNTAIN GROWN

I wrote a letter to *Karousel* about Mountain Grown. My favorite band, my very favorite, next to Janis. *Karousel* didn’t print the letter and I know that Mountain Grown isn’t all that big yet.

Mountain Grown plays all of the country, even here in south Jersey. They’re always at the Rockery. I guess that’s way too small for *Karousel*. Every time they play at the Rockery me and Sherry go see them and once I wrote this long letter to Zag, the singer, and he sent me this autographed photo that I have hanging over my bed. He’s so slick. I look at that picture all the time and sometimes I think about me and Zag, like I could be his old lady or something, and then we’d go away, far away. And then I think maybe I’m a little too into it, you know? Maybe *I* should write to the Doctor’s Bag!

So Mountain Grown were coming to the Rockery again and me and Sherry got “all dolled up.” It’s something my mom says: “You girls are all dolled up!” Me and Sherry both know Carl, the head bouncer, and he *knows* me and Sherry are the biggest fans of Mountain Grown and Zag. We both got there early and Carl saw us and gave us a big thumbs-up and then we scooted right up to the front. Sherry was smoking one cigarette after another. Her parents won’t let her smoke in the house, so when she’s out she’s Sherry, the human smokestack. The Rockery filled up really fast and got more and more crowded. There were lots of faces I recognized; some people from Leedsville High. A lame-ass band went on first and a few people hollered out “Zag!” really loud, which wasn’t cool at all. I thought that first band sucked too but it’s really uncool to yell out stuff.

They finally left the stage and me and Sherry waited and waited for Mountain Grown to come on. It seemed like fucking *hours*. And then all of a sudden they came on stage and we totally freaked! Sherry and me almost got whiplash! Zag was doing his thing on stage and then it got quiet for a split-second and we yelled out his name as loud as we could. We’d planned to do it like that and it worked because Zag heard us. He heard us and he looked down right at us, and then he said, “Well, hello ladies!” In that smoky southern voice: “Wel-l-l-l. *Hel-l-l-o* ladies!” Saying it right to the two of us, and then they just kicked it in, playing one song after another, new stuff and older stuff. Me and Sherry didn’t stop moving the *whole night*. All of us, all the people crammed up front, were going crazy. The band just *ripped* and it was totally fucking awesome.

And then at some point Zag looked around and gave this sneaky little grin and pulled out this bottle of Southern Comfort and took a swig. Then he crouched down and passed the bottle to a bunch of people in the front row. Everyone was passing the bottle back and forth and me and Sherry took a swig and then Sherry got to be the one to hand the bottle back to Zag. And then right on stage he lifted the bottle over his head and the crowd went crazy. He drank right on stage, winking at all of us.

When the show ended we pushed our way backstage. We’d decided that tonight, at this show,

when they'd finished playing we were going to see Zag no matter what. Nothing was going to stop us, except maybe a major earthquake or something. There was this one big dude standing around, making sure nobody got backstage and then Carl saw us and he came over to say hello. Then he said something to the big dude, who was just standing there with his eyes half-shut and then after Carl talked to him he looked over at us and smiled. "Oh, yeah!" he said. "The two chicks in the front row. With Zag's bottle!" And he made this deep bow and waved us in. "Well, come on, girls," he said, and he made a big show out of letting us backstage and then he said something to Carl that I didn't hear and they both laughed.

We'd never been back here before and there was all this shit going on, like people running around and some instruments and speakers and there was a lot of noise. Suddenly this other guy came up to us. "You lost?" he said to us in a southern accent, laughing, and then Sherry told him that we were allowed to go back and see Zag, that Carl and the guy at the door said it was okay. Sherry said this all really quickly because both of us were a little nervous now. I don't know why. This guy looked like he was trying not to laugh and he said, "Well…Mr. Zag's upstairs," and we weren't sure what to do so he made this big show of turning around and pointing at the stairs in the back. "Upstairs," he told us. "Ain't nobody going to bite your heads off!" And then he laughed. We'd never been this far back in the Rockery and we'd never seen those stairs before. "Up you go!" the southern guy said, so we went up the stairs and I was starting to feel a little freaked out, just a little.

We went up these old stairs and there was this big, dark room, like backstage but bigger and darker. It was really dark but crowded; you could tell that. Lots of people walking around and I could smell reef all over the place. Beer too. We kept moving up, inch by inch, and nobody was saying anything to us. "I have to pee," Sherry whispered to me, and that got us laughing. A few people looked our way. We kept on creeping ahead and then all of a sudden there he was: Zag. Just like I'd always seen him on stage, looking like a king, just sitting in the middle of the room on this big old ratty couch with his shirt off. He took a swig from a bottle of Comfort and then someone handed him this big, fat joint. Finally he spotted us. "Well, well…" he drawled. "What have we here?" And he smiled. "Don't be shy," he said in a loud way, and then he laughed.

I felt like a total dipshit and then my eyes got used to the dark, the smoke. There were some chicks there too, just standing around, and they shot us some dirty looks. Everybody was standing around, looking at Zag, like they were waiting for him to say something and he took this big drag and leaned back on the couch. "Yeah," he said, his voice all hoarse. "All them fucking towns look the same after awhile. Bumfuck Nebraska. Bumfuck Massachusetts." People laughed and then he took another swig from the bottle. Sherry and me just stood there. He dragged out the word *Massachusetts,* and then he said, "I know *all* about these shitholes. That little shithole in Alabama…growing up in that little shithole. Fuck. *Fuck!* We was so fucking poor…so fucking poor. My first instrument–my very first instrument–"

"—was a washboard!" somebody yelled out, like they'd heard the story a million times, but Zag acted like he didn't care and took another swig. "…was a washboard," he said. "A goddam *washboard!* Can you believe that? We was that fucking poor! A fucking *washboard!* How can you play rock 'n' roll on a *fucking washboard?*"

"Zig-zag wanderer!" a guy shouted, and there was laughter.

Zag took another hit and closed his eyes, sucking it in as hard as he could. Me and Sherry were just

standing there, feeling really, really uncomfortable. Then he opened his eyes. “Always had time for girls,” he said. “Yeah…always had…poontang on my mind,” and he got really loud again. Everybody laughed and all of a sudden I spotted Carl, standing off to the side. “Thirteen…even at thirteen, man. Fucking thirteen and horny all the time.” He took another hit and passed the joint to someone else. “There was this girl…lived in my town. Older. Always hanging around me. Real skinny but real cute. *Real* cute.”

“Zag, you’re full of shit!” Carl called out, laughing.

“Fuck you!” Zag shouted, but then he started laughing. “I’m telling a goddam *story*. You don’t interrupt when a man’s telling a *goddam story!* Fuck…where was I? Oh yeah–she was really skinny…” and then he made this weird movement with his hands. “She’d let me take her by the creek. Every day we’d go down to the creek. I had to beg and beg and beg and I guess I finally wore her down and we did it…in this old vacant house. *Oooomph!* Once I got a taste of it…man, that was it!” He shook his head. “Man!”

“It’s time for you to settle down, son,” one of the guys told him. Sherry and me were just standing there, not knowing what to do. “I don’t need to,” Zag said all of a sudden. “*Settle down*. Settle down…got me a girl in every port. Every place we play…got me a special old lady.”

I took a step back and for some reason, I don’t know why, he noticed that. “Where ya goin’, honey?” he said to me, and I could see him smile. “Don’t run away, sweethearts! Ain’t nobody going to bite you!” He squinted through all that smoke. “What’d you say your names were?” The room got really quiet and we were both nervous as shit.

“Patty.”

“Sherry.”

He looked at us and then he said those words, those words to us. He said it, right there, out loud. To me it was like: “B*lank. Blank. Blank.*” Like I wasn’t even hearing it and I couldn’t even repeat any of what he said. I know I could feel myself getting all red and scared and he was saying all that to us. All that stuff. I couldn’t hear the rest of it or even see because my eyes were all filled with tears and I don’t know how we got out of there. But we did. Somehow we got downstairs and out the door and away from the Rockery all in one minute. I still couldn’t see. My mouth was all dry and suddenly I felt like we were the two stupidest girls ever. Sherry was crying a little and she was going “What a stupid prick” over and over; saying it over and over and I felt like telling her to shut up but didn’t. When I got home I thought for sure that I was going to tear up my picture of Zag. But I didn’t. I just took it down and put it away.

MORE

I never told Sid all that shit that happened with Zag. I would tell Sid all sorts of stuff, but not about that. And the funny thing is that me and Sherry never talked about it again, ever. It was like it all disappeared.

Sid and I were in some of the same classes and he was always quiet, which I thought was cool. I remember one of our first conversations, when he told me about playing the piano and that he had taken lessons for years from this old woman from Austria and that she knew all these songs from World War I. Then I heard that his father was the dean of the business school at the college. And

then I guess we just kept talking and talking.

I know my mom isn't crazy about him. She hasn't really said anything, but I can tell. She always tries to make stupid conversation with him and is real uncomfortable and asks stuff about the college and his father. Sid tries to be nice to her. It's sad, all of it. She wasn't crazy about Chuck either, but she understood guys like Chuck even though his bike made her nervous and she thought that anybody with really long hair had to be a juvenile delinquent. But at least she could tell all her stupid friends that I had a boyfriend. Sid's really quiet and he plays the piano. When my mom tries to talk to him and ask all those questions you can tell that she doesn't know what she's talking about and you can tell she sounds like a fucking idiot.

I don't know what we are, me and Sid. I mean, we're not boyfriend and girlfriend. It's not like that, not like the way it was with Chuck. We don't even kiss. Sometimes we hug good-bye. He's not my boyfriend but it's not like hanging out with Gina or Sherry either. But I can tell him everything. My whole life story: How my dad split when I was little, or the stuff with my mom, or a book I'm reading, or what somebody said to me. And he wants to hear all of it, even weirdo stuff that nobody likes but me: mythology and legends, unicorns, how I read the *Odyssey*. I tell Sid way, way more than I've ever told anybody, more than I ever told Sherry. Sooner or later I get bored with everybody. But not Sid.

Sid is so quiet but then…I think it's because he's so quiet and always practicing the piano or reading, and you don't expect him to say the kind of stuff that he does. You don't expect it when he makes fun of some of the teachers or imitates his father. He told me that his dad thought he was a moron when he first started to get into science fiction. His father said reading that stuff was just the dumbest thing in the world. Sid told me that when he was younger he told his father that he didn't think college was that important and you could learn more from life. His dad totally hit the roof. He didn't expect to hear that from Sid. Not Sid!

I had dinner over there once. Man, his father…. Sid told me that when they used to go out to that big fish restaurant in Cape May, his father would make a big point of saying he was the dean, so they'd get seated quicker or get better service. At dinner I got into this big fight with his father. He was going on and on about how great the war in Vietnam had been and that the campus protestors were all bums. "How can you say that?" I kept asking. He thought he was so superior, like he knew everything. He told me, "When you get out in the real world things won't be so black-and-white." But I gave it right back to him. "I *have* been in the real world," I told him. My mom always had to work and make ends meet. And I'd always worked too; first at Gargano's bakery and then at the diner. Sid's mom just sat there, looking sad, and his dad just kept at it. The twerpy younger brother, that little shit, kept staring at me and trying not laugh.

I looked over at Sid. I was afraid, like maybe he'd be mad at me or something, mad because I was getting into a fight with his dad, but Sid was eating, real calm, and there was the strangest look on his face. Almost like…like…like he was *proud* or something. I know it sounds funny, but that's what I really think it was. Like he was happy someone was standing up to his dad and not backing down. It was like his mother wasn't even there, staring off into space. His father–the dean– and brother stared at me like I was this weird thing. But Sid had this real calm look on his face. It was almost like he was trying not to smile.

So that's Sid's family.

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Last week I came home and that awful Mrs. Heimbach was over. She and my mom were playing cards. I walked in and I could already hear Mrs. Heimbach talking in that loud, stupid voice. “My husband was German. Crazy clean! You couldn’t drop a single thing on the floor, not a crumb. Crazy clean! You know Germans.” Blah blah blah. Jesus Christ! She and my mom were smoking up a storm, playing cards and drinking their tenth cup of coffee. “Where’s your young man?” Mrs. Heimbach asked me in that croaking voice. *Up your ass*, I should have said.

“Is he her *young man*?” my mom said, and then both of them started cackling and I really didn’t know what to say so I went upstairs to my room. Later I called Sid because Mrs. Heimbach and my mom were both making me sick to my stomach. And we had the nicest talk. He always knew just what to say and he always got me to laugh. I don’t know how he did it, but he always said the right thing.

Once he told me, “You know, jerks have kids too.” That was one of the best things he ever said to me. Like our parents were people once. Jerky, weird people and just because they had kids didn’t mean that they’d change.

In a way he knows stuff that you’d only tell your boyfriend. I’ve told Sid way, way more than I ever told Chuck or anybody else; like about my mom, school, or whatever’s happening. We’re so honest with each other! And I know all this stuff about *him*, like all through eighth grade he had a crush on Holly Scanlon. And then there are these times when I sort of find myself thinking about Sid in that way, like we really are boyfriend and girlfriend, and like maybe sometimes I want to hold him or want him to hold me. But then he becomes Sid again and we’re just hanging out and having fun.

LET’S PARK AND FREAK OUT

Gina is older than me; she’s older than me or Sherry and she got her driver’s license before us. I can’t wait until I can drive. All the things you can do, the places you can go. Gina had just learned to drive so she gave me and Sid a ride in her car. It was really her parents’ car; this big old boat. She drove us out to the big houses along the gold coast and then near the bay, and then she decided that it would be really fun to speed up every time she saw a bump in the road. She’d rev the engine and then go super-fast and we’d hit the bump and the car would go sailing in the air for a second or two. All three of us would pitch forward, bumping our heads against the roof. She was really into it. Gina thought it was the funniest thing in the world. “Look—there’s one!” she would say when there was a bump, and she’d speed the car up. She’d drive really fast and we’d go flying.

It was fun but it got to be a little scary after a while. She’s a crazy girl. But it was Sid who was having the time of his life. Sid, of all people. “Hey Gina!” he’d go. “Look! There’s another one!” and Gina would get all excited and floor the car. “I thought you were the sensible one!” I said to him.

And then later on in the week this thing happened that was either really funny or totally, totally fucked up. Gina was driving us around, me and Sid, and we stopped at the local HappyMart to get cigarettes for her. I ran in and bought them and then we hung out in the car for a few minutes. And Gina said, “Do you guys want to hit the Dairy Queen?” And Sid was like, “Yeah! Let’s hit the Dairy Queen!” We pulled out of the HappyMart parking lot and headed down Mariner Road when suddenly there were these flashing red lights behind us. It was a cop car.

Gina hit her hands on the steering wheel. “Shit!” she said. “I wasn’t speeding. Was I speeding?” She pulled the car over to the side and then I remembered that I’d bought cigarettes for her and I was underage. “Gina,” I said really fast, “put the cigarettes away,” but she didn’t do anything because there really wasn’t time and she looked really worried. Sid looked all nervous and I was scared, because I was the one who’d bought them. The cop came over and asked for Gina’s license and registration. The glove compartment was a total mess and at first she couldn’t find anything at all, but then she showed him and then the cop made all three of us get out of the car, right there on Mariner Road. And then it got even weirder, because a second cop car pulled up and then this cop on a motorcycle. None of the cops mentioned speeding or buying cigarettes and then the motorcycle cop walked over and asked us all our names. He looked over at Sid. “Is your dad at the college?” And Sid said yes and we all relaxed a little. “Yeah,” the cop said. “I took some classes at the business school,” and Sid tried to smile.

The motorcycle cop moved in closer, getting right near us. “We got a report that you guys were going to hit the Dairy Queen,” he said, and for a few seconds none of us knew what he was talking about. But then it made sense—kind of. We’d all talked about “hitting the Dairy Queen.” It was crazy! Who could have heard us say that? Who would have told the cops? There were two cop cars and a motorcycle cop, all of them stopped on Mariner Road. The motorcycle cop was smiling and he looked at us and said, “Listen. If you guys are going to hit a Dairy Queen, don’t do it on my turf. Got it?” He was looking at all of us and I didn’t know what to say and Sid nodded. The first cop handed Gina her license and registration and then the cop on the bike and the other two cops left.

We sat in the car for a while, just sitting there, before driving away. I don’t know if the whole thing was funny or scary or both. Maybe some old lady heard us say that we were going to hit the DQ. I don’t know. And I thought we were going to get nailed because I bought cigarettes. “Jesus Christ,” Gina said. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

CHICKENSHIT

I worked in the Northcroft Diner through most of last year. A couple of nights after school, maybe a little bit on weekends. It’s not like I get a lot of spending money from my mom, that’s for sure, with all those household expensives.

I don’t think the diner did all that well. The manager, Joe, had this squeaky, high-pitched voice. He spent almost all his time trying to stay out of trouble. I couldn’t believe that he was only twenty-nine. He had this stupid-looking short hair and a horrible little moustache. Right after I started working there the diner had this kids’ charity event or something like that, and Joe wore a Mickey Mouse costume and posed with all these kids, Cub Scouts or something. The picture ran in the *Gazette* and he was so freaking proud of that. He cut it out and hung it right by the cash register.

The assistant manager was Brenda, this awful woman with long, stringy hair and her whole life was the Northcroft Diner. Sometimes I’d show up for my shift like five minutes before I had to start and finally she took me aside, all serious. “Patty,” she said, “we think it would be a good idea if you came in a little earlier for your shift. So you don’t have to rush. It looks bad.” She was telling me this like it was so, so important. I said, “Who’s *we*?” And I really meant it, because it was just her standing there, just the two of us, and she had said “*We* think it would be a good idea.” She actually blushed when I asked her that and then she said she meant her and Joe. I began coming in earlier and then Brenda had a long talk with me about following your dreams, and that

she had started out as a part-time waitress and it had been her goal to rise up in life and if you worked hard you could achieve all that you wanted to achieve.

One night I was behind the counter; it was just me and Brenda and all of a sudden she burst out laughing for no reason at all. “Sorry,” she said. “I was just thinking of something funny.” Jesus!

I’d only work the register and the others would waitress. A lot of times me and this girl Lindy would work the same shifts. She covered most of the tables and she wouldn’t take shit from anybody. She was always arguing with Joe. She’d want more hours or different shifts or was mad at the busboy or the cook for one reason or another. Joe was afraid of her, which was funny. I mean, he was the boss, right? “All right, Lindy,” he would say and sigh. “All right, Lindy.” And then Lindy and the cook, Art, ended up really hating each other. Art was this total fuck-up who did nothing but complain about his wife. He seemed to screw up one thing after another. Something happened and his car got taken away and he had to come to work on this little bicycle, a grown man peddling into the parking lot. He’d finish his shift and say “So long, chief,” to Joe or “See you, cap’n” or “Happy trails” and then he’d get on his bike and go home. Lindy was always on Art’s ass to speed up the orders, to hurry, but Art seemed to follow his own pace, like getting into conversations with the Puerto Rican guys who washed the dishes, or talking to Joe and Brenda, or sometimes me.

Lindy definitely had her favorite customers, like she’d suck up to a lot of the guys, and there was this one Leedsville cop who used to come in all the time and sit in a booth and try to talk to her every chance he got. “He ain’t here for my cooking,” Art said.

Finally they had to cut her hours down, I think because business was falling. She and Joe got into this big-time fight off in the back. “I’m sick of this chickenshit outfit!” she kept yelling. “This is a chickenshit outfit!” I couldn’t really understand what Joe was saying but you could hear his whiny voice and it all ended with Lindy quitting that night. Joe had to wait on the customers and it was awful and funny all at the same time. They hired another waitress right away but then Joe ended up cutting down my hours too, and finally I had to quit.

REMEMBER THE GOOD TIMES!

When they first gave out all the information on the prom, I couldn’t believe that anybody was really interested. God, the prom: tuxedos, stupid dresses, flowers. I asked my mom if she went to her prom. “Oh, *of course*,” she said, lighting a cigarette. “*Of course* I did,” and she went on and on with this boring story about how her date picked her up at her house and how they danced and what they ate and a million other stupid little details. Sid and I made all these jokes about the prom and he was really funny, describing all the jocks that were probably going to be there and he did this really great imitation of the kind of music that the band was probably going to play. But on the night of the prom I was hanging out at home and all of a sudden I started to feel really bad. Really awful.

It was like I just couldn’t get the stupid prom out of my mind, and I felt more and more like this total lunatic. And then I had this dumb, stupid thought that I couldn’t get out of my head, either. I thought about how much Sid played the piano, how good he was at playing the piano, but I thought that he had never once sat down and played just for me. Just the two of us. But it was so stupid to think things like that. And then I kept thinking it again. There was something really wrong with me.

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The prom came and went and I felt better and I forgot all about the stuff that was making me feel so bad. But then all of a sudden I started to think that everything just sucked, like *everything*. Like it all sucked and it didn't matter and everything seemed stupid. It was this scary feeling, to think all that, and then I started to really hate my house more than I ever had before. This stupid house I had to live in, me and my worthless mom. And school seemed awful and there was this one night when I was home in my room, just feeling like it all sucked and everything was terrible, and then just like that I got a call from Sid. I couldn't believe how happy I was to hear from him. It felt like the call from Sid was going to rescue me. I felt ten times better. And he could tell something was wrong. He really could; he could tell right away that something was wrong and he wanted to come over, and so like an hour later he did.

My mom was going out the door when he came in. I didn't know where she was going and I didn't give a shit at all. I didn't even want to hear her stupid voice, and Sid came up to my room and we just sat on my bed, and we started talking like we'd talked a million times before, and I couldn't believe how much better I felt, how great it was to talk to him, how amazing he made me feel. We could tell each other everything, and we sat in my room and talked some more and then everything came out in this big rush, and I started to cry. I couldn't believe that I was crying, actually crying in front of him. I told him he was my best friend and I cried a little more.

Sid looked weird, like he didn't know what to do exactly. I'd never cried in front of him and he looked so worried so I kept saying, "It's all right…it's going to be all right." I kept saying that to him, like it was Sid who was crying and not me. I finally stopped crying and we were both sitting on the bed and I let out a few deep breaths and then I looked at him. I looked him over and he seemed so worried, all worried and awkward. He was just sitting there, looking weird, and I just wanted to make him feel better. And make me feel better too, I guess.

And then I did the dumbest, stupidest thing. It's so stupid that I still can't believe it; so stupid, stupid, stupid; something the dumbest person in the world would do, but suddenly I was afraid I was going to start crying again and Sid was just sitting there and then in this big crazy rush I said "I love you" to Sid and buried my face in his chest. Why did I do that? Why the *fuck* did I do that? I don't know why I said that, why I did that, and I'd give anything—*anything*—in the whole wide world to take it back, to take all of it—all of it—back.

I put my head on his chest and he just sat there, frozen, not moving and not even breathing, it seemed like. Like a statue. My eyes were shut but I knew what was going on; I could tell Sid was frozen. I felt stupid, so stupid all of a sudden, the most stupid I've ever felt in my entire stupid life. I lifted my head up and I was so ashamed that I could barely look at him, and he looked scared and like he was hardly breathing, like he wasn't moving a muscle. And finally he said something. I can't remember at all what he said. But he said something and then he got up and left.

It's been weeks now. And I haven't heard from him at all, not at all, and then I think I should call him but I just don't, and maybe he thinks he should call me, but he doesn't. My mom knows something but she doesn't say anything. I ruined it. I ruined everything. Sometimes I really hate myself and sometimes I even hate Sid, but what I hate most of all is that I ruined it.

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Dear Doctor's Bag,

I had this super-close best friend and then I did something really stupid. I was best friends with this guy and we were really, really close. Then one night it all went up in this big puff of smoke. It's because I said all this stuff that I shouldn't of said. It's all my fault. I should of kept my big mouth shut and it's all my fault. He won't really talk to me anymore. I ruined my best friendship ever. And I don't know what to do.

Janis

Dear Janis,

Have you heard the old saying, "Honesty in the best policy?" If you still want this dude's friendship, be honest! Being upfront is always the best policy. Tell him what you really think and feel, and level with him. Nine times out of ten, when you're honest with a friend, he'll come around. Good luck!

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