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Hangman's Note

The sound of a dozen people snoring filled the spacious, wood-floored room of the Chilean hostel, as I sat angry and drunk in an armchair scrawling a note on a pad from the bus station.

“The truth is that I’ve still wanted to be with you every second of my life these past four months. And that’s why I don’t want to talk to you for a while. I need to figure out how to live without you.”

I stuffed the note in my pocket and stumbled back into our shared room. I tripped over her packed bags and fell into the nearest bed.

“Who was the person you’ve hurt the most in the world?” Abi had asked me four months earlier as we sat on our patio. She slowly sipped a 40-ounce bottle of Quilmes beer, making a small sucking sound at the end of each sip and wincing slightly. All the Argentines raved about Quilmes, but it tasted about as unique as a Bud Light.

I fingered my brain’s filing cabinets for several minutes, searching for the answer. She never took her eyes off me, quiet and reflective. She wasn’t going to let me talk about anything else until I answered the question. Eventually I settled on my answer: I hurt a high school girlfriend who I dumped because she was too depressed and self-loathing for a 16-year-old boy with surging hormones to handle. Abi frowned, unimpressed with my answer. She wanted something more meaningful than a stupid high school girlfriend. She wanted something life-changing, something that had been stuck in the back of my head for years. But my answer was true: up until that point, I hadn’t cared about anyone enough in my life to really feel any debilitating remorse for hurting them.

We were in our first few weeks studying abroad in Buenos Aires, Argentina, getting our bearings in a new city where the people spoke the Spanish “L” with a *shuh* and sounded more Italian than the Mexican that I was used to. I did what I do whenever thrust into a new situation: I treated life like a book and turned my eyes downward, getting comfortable with my surroundings before I ventured into the realm of friend-making. I brought a tome of Argentine history with me on the flight, bending my back under the weight of hundreds of years of history. I spent time connecting the troubled history of Argentina I read about with what I was seeing day-to-day in the huge metropolis.

Abi, on the other hand, turned her eyes upward and focused in on every face she saw. She stopped by construction workers at night to ask them about their wives and kids. She could and would get every single cab driver, homeless person, or college student to pour out their life stories to her within five minutes. An auburn-haired girl with facial piercings, she had a radiance that everyone can see but no one can define. There was a certain curiosity and authenticity stamped on her face like a birthmark right below her big green eyes. As a hopeful journalist, I was immensely jealous and astonished at her ability to conduct life like it was one seamless interview. In a lot of ways, we were similar in that curiosity about other humans, except that I was too afraid of other people to ask the questions that rolled off her tongue like the Argentine *er-re*.

We were living together at a house in the Palermo District, a hip area with bar-staurants that liked to serve appetizers instead of entrees, cocktails instead of beers, and American girls instead of American guys. There were twelve other housemates – almost all students from the states – and one house mom named Elda who spent her entire waking life smoking cigarettes, cooking us dinner, and talking to her pet schnauzer. In the beginning I mostly kept my mouth

shut at the rowdy dinner table filled with university students drinking too much wine. I felt the familiar, awkward feeling that I've always gotten when shoved into a new place with entirely new people.

Needless to say, small talk has never been my thing. I have always preferred small conversations with one or two people over a couple of beers rather than big parties with a bunch of nameless bodies. The only problem is that college students studying abroad don't really want to do anything but go out to clubs and bars.

Abi was something different. When we sat around the house getting to know our housemates, sometimes I could tell she got just as bored with all the small talk as I did. But while I'd just throw on my headphones and listen to *Radiohead* whenever I was tired of it, she was good at hiding her boredom. She'd listen attentively and ask the right questions. But it was always obvious to me that she wanted to dive head-first into people's brains rather than dipping her feet.

Soon into our time in Argentina, Abi and I came up with an anti-small-talk game. It was one of those dreary, rainy, cold days that beg for sheet forts to be built and for hot chocolate to be drunk. All that I had to entertain us was a hangman app that I had downloaded from a car trip several months ago. To conquer the monotony, we decided to up the ante. For every five points that one of us got in hangman, we decided, we could ask the other any question we wanted, and they had to answer. The questions were never easy.

"What do you fear most about your future?" we both asked each other. "What do you want your children's names to be?" "Would you want to survive until 90 if all of your friends were dead?" "What's the most hatred you've felt for someone?"

We were hooked. Within days, hangman itself didn't even matter. It was just a benchmark for when the next one of us would get to ask a question. We sat next to each other in class and scrawled ideas for our next questions in each other's notebooks. We'd come home and sit in the living room with our friends, but we'd look at each other with a knowing glance and wait for the right time to excuse ourselves and go answer a new question. We'd sit and play hangman in the park, each racking up so many questions that we lost count. We'd spend hours at a time trying to come up with the best answer, and then we would convene on the patio or on the rooftop to discuss them over some beers and some cigarettes for her. Those nights almost always led to several hours' worth of conversation, and there were some nights that we got so caught up in it that our friends would go out to the clubs without us.

The main thing that made it work was that we were so totally invested in it that I knew she was never going to tell me a lie, and she knew that I'd spend all day if necessary to come up with the right answer to a question.

Eventually I started to want something else. I knew I felt something deeper than that friendship, but she had never been in a real relationship before. I was scared and unable to form spoken words with my applesauce mouth. So I decided to write her a note one day at our house, spilling my guts into it and telling her that I wanted to be with her. I wrote that she was the best thing that ever happened to me, that she was irreplaceable. I wrote it once, and then I threw it away and wrote it again. It had to be perfect.

I walked from my room up a seemingly endless set of stairs to secretly deliver it to her room while she was in the shower. I gently placed the note on her pillow and left. For the next hour, I sat in my room, my heart pounding as I tried to listen to music to calm myself. Had she

looked at it yet? It had been too long already, she must have just torn it up and thrown it in the garbage.

Finally, she gently knocked on my door and came in. I turned, pulled out my headphones and said, “what’s up,” all cool-cat like I didn’t know what she was there for. She knew it was a sham and called me over to the bed, saying she wanted to talk to me. We sat down, her hair still sopping wet from the shower as she rubbed her hands nervously on her legs. I felt like she was looking at me like I was a sick puppy in need of care. I looked away, knowing what was coming.

“I’m sorry, but I just can’t do this right now. You’re one of my best friends, and I just don’t want to change that.”

I immediately spat out an apology. *Why?* I asked myself. *I did nothing wrong. I told my feelings to the girl I liked, and she rejected me.* Still, I apologized, and I tried to brush it off, to make it seem like it wasn’t a big deal, like I had just lost a little league baseball game but was still going to get pizza afterwards so it’s-all-good. She didn’t buy it.

After that day I felt like we could never go back to those easier days, when the questions were all that mattered. I knew this would be looming over our heads. She’d bested me; I came out looking like a sick dog and she came out on top.

For the next few months, the questions still continued, but my heart wasn’t as in them as before. I’d see her occasionally come home with other guys. My blood boiled and I tensed up when something went wrong with one of them and she came to me to comfort her. But I could never say anything: all that I needed and wanted to say was written on that one note, and she rejected it with a thank-you-very-much-but-no.

So that was why, months later, I sat in a Chilean hostel, half-drunk and full-angry, writing an almost illegible note at 3 a.m. the night before Abi would leave to catch her flight

home. It was now or never; after the next morning I wouldn't see her for at least two more months. I finished the note, and it was everything I wanted it to be: it was mad, it was sad, it was nice, and, most of all it said that we couldn't be friends anymore. I couldn't handle it. I was done. She and the rest of my friends slept gently in the other room, and I contemplated.

Should I send it to her? Will it hurt her more than I hope to? I had so many things to express, but I just didn't want them to come off wrong in the note. No, I need to do this for myself, to relearn how to live on my own. But am I ready to give up a friendship because of my selfishness? What if we were never even meant to be in a relationship, and were just best friends? What if, like everything else, it's all been in my head? I fell into bed to sleep it over.

The next morning, I got up before everyone else and went over to her packed suitcase. I opened it up, put the letter on top of her clothes, and resealed it. I went for a walk around a park, doing anything to clear my head. When I got back, Abi was ready to leave. I could tell by the smile on her face when she saw me that she hadn't seen the note. She ran up and hugged me for several minutes, her hands clutching at the back of my shirt. I loosely wrapped my hands around her and put my chin on her forehead. I had already said everything I wanted to say; she just didn't know it yet. She left, her suitcase still sealed, still crying. It's all for the best, I told myself. I had already made up my mind, and I didn't want to have to talk to her about it and face her crying even more. For once, things were going to be on my terms. It would be at least two months until the next time I would have to see her, and I was already dreading the awkward reunion we would have as we passed by each other at USD.

Several weeks later, I sat in my room in New Orleans on my laptop, my lymph nodes enflamed with mono. In the past few weeks, I had visited Lima, I had hiked Machu Picchu by

myself, I had ridden bikes down the Andean mountainside. I had had fluent conversations in Spanish with local Peruvians about everything from politics to death. I hadn't talked to Abi for three weeks. But still, for the hundredth time since I left Chile, I checked my email to see if her name popped up, to see if time made her realize that she felt the same way that I still did. I started to type an "A" in the recipient box. Her name was the first to show up. I clicked on it and started typing symbols. *Am I really about to undo everything that I just did? Was this whole fiasco for nothing?* I shut my brain off and hit send, shooting off a blank hangman puzzle.

She responded three minutes later with a single letter: "E."