

SAGE GREY

ALMOST ME, NOW FREE

7:24 p.m.

As I hung up the phone, my mind raced and my entire body went numb. The image of his face blocked my thoughts from any possible sense, and distorted my concept of time, reality, and pain. I fell to my bed with my jaw wired shut as the realization of what I had just heard overtook me.

Taylor was gone.

It had started as a typical day; I had just got home from work and was attempting to cool down with little help from the single ceiling fan present in my bedroom. Any other day I would have started cracking beers and smoking bowls until I finally passed out only to wake the next morning and do it all again. Instead, I had just picked up the phone to hear news I shall never forget.

Assuming he had forgotten about the five hundred mile move I had made to the little town of Durango a few months before, I was waiting for him to ask me if I had any smoke he could buy off me. With a title that could only be “acquaintance,” Keegan’s voice came through the earpiece of my phone. Tired, and a little aggravated, I automatically adjusted when his voice came thru as what was both uncommonly and unmistakably sincere.

“Hey Sage,” he said.

His tone informed me that something was wrong and after a short but revealing conversation, the phone-line went numb after he ended with...

“I just thought you should know.”

After two years of butting heads with this east coast punk over status within our social clique, I finally realized that Keegan truly was a friend. In his own way, he cared and felt honest compassion towards me.

As I lay in an almost fetal position on the edge of my white down comforter, in the art of a broken record, the information I had just received replayed over and over in my mind. The morning of his flight back to Boulder, Taylor was found by his sister, lifeless in bed. At first the doctors informed his family that his body had experienced an overdose of a cocktail he had constructed of zanex, percaset, and alcohol, but the official claim to death was failure due to complications regarding doctor prescribed medications. Those of us who were closest to him during his finally months knew the truth and had no option but to simply ignore his family’s passive decision. Taylor died of a severe overdose consisting of substances that he had been playing with long enough to understand their boundaries. There is no question in my mind that he knew exactly what

he was doing before bidding our world goodbye.

9:30 p.m.

As I lay in bed, still motionless, I recalled first meeting Taylor. It was only eight months before his death and we had both returned for another un-educational and hazed-over year at the University of Colorado. We were like two children playing on a playground when we came to find one another in a sandbox consisting of the first bite into pseudo-freedom. There were no parents to supervise us, and we could play however we liked. Instead of toys and sand, however, there was a collection of drugs and alcohol.

We both had become educated on playground rules separately, and both had begun questioning our own position on the teeter-totter upon which our lives were perched.

After a bad break-up with a girl I had all but given my heart to, I went to a party at my buddy Jeremy's house.

Sitting on the railing of the cookie-cut balcony next to Jeremy, I watched as clouds of gray smoke danced around the balcony and eventually faded into the trees surrounding Boulder Creek.

"I can't believe my roommate is a bisexual!" Jeremy said with a laugh to us.

I had known for a long time that when it came to sex, I was an addict. I had lusted after many young ladies growing up and from the time I can remember holding my own thoughts, I was thinking about boys as well. It is not something I understood, but nevertheless I had no issue acting on these urges so long as I thought I would not get caught in the act. Having never met Jeremy's newly "outed" roommate, I had already been "eye fucking" the young man in question since I had first arrived at the party. Through the screen door, Jeremy pointed into the kitchen across the typically grotesque apartment to the boy he shared it with.

Interesting, I thought while attempting to not make it completely obvious that I was returning Taylor's semi-subtle gazes. As the party grew dimmer and the cocaine grew more encouraging, by chance a liquor run was in need. I volunteered my driving services considering myself indestructible under this type of influence and boldly made eye contact with Taylor.

"Anyone want to join me?" I asked

Taylor was not a poster-framed individual with a perfect complexion and crystal blue eyes, but instead, he possessed average height, strength, and a perfectly dull hippie/chic sense of style. Still, he was unarguably attractive, with short, dark wavy hair and a cute chiseled jaw line. But what drew me to him was the honesty I saw within his smile, and what made me fall over the next few months was the radiance of his personality.

1:06 a.m.

How had I been so blind? I questioned myself, still incapable of crying due to the incredibly hollow feeling of pain that had overtaken me. From that first wild night that ended with me holding Taylor in my arms, fully content in every way, I knew that his presence would haunt my dreams forever; I just didn't expect it to be in this way. I couldn't believe that he had left me for good. Unable to find comfort in my lonely bedding, I dialed my own voicemail where by luck I had saved the message that Taylor had left me just days before his organized departure. As I heard his voice my heart clenched as if a claw were tearing it into a thousand little pieces and, for the first time since my grandfather passed, a tear fell from my eye and rolled almost timelessly down my cheek. My senses pulsed with the fan above me, which had begun slowly mixing my thoughts into a trance.

His words seemed so passionate and full of life as they sunk into me deeper every time I hit replay. My mind raced back to a coffee shop on Pearl Street where I was uncomfortably awaiting the arrival of my "Sex, Gender, and U.S. Society" professor. Amanda came through the door with her pixie walk and, holding a cup of tea, sat beside me almost anxiously. The semester I had spent in her class had opened my eyes and made me question who I was as a person and who I wanted to become. I completed her course by painting my final project representing a mirror reflecting a young woman struggling with her gender identity. Looking back, I think Amanda knew why I had asked her to meet with me. I told her about my ex-girlfriend and about my (then new) relationship with Taylor; describing the pure emotion he was drawing from me.

"You shouldn't be ashamed of your feelings toward him," she said. "You were raised to suppress those feelings by a society that constructed binaries upon you, but you can't push away who you are!"

2:45 a.m.

Still processing the news of Taylor's death, I thought to myself as I attempted to feel more anger rather than sorrow, or perhaps more guilt rather than the pain. Had I listened, perhaps Taylor would be beside me now, bringing joy into the soul of every person he greets, just as he used to.

Instead I had pushed Taylor away. The week before he passed, on a trip home to his family's ranch in Texas (where he intended to inform his parents of his sexual orientation) he called me, hoping I loved him enough to be with him and help support him through everything. Instead I cowered, like a pup with his tail firmly between his legs, and told him I would never be in an open relationship with another man.

"I'm sorry man, of course I love being with you and want to keep doing it, but I don't think I am ever going to be open about it," I said harshly. His voice disappeared. I did not answer his phone call just a few days later, and so in return I was left with this short, inevitably torturous voicemail. One that will forever remind me of the person he was, the person I was, and the events that quite easily could have overtaken me. Irreversibly, I was not even given the chance to formally say goodbye to this person I could not help but love.

5:42 a.m.

I looked over to the clock ticking on my wall. My bed was holding me captive and I knew that the funeral services for Taylor were starting in just a few short hours. I was in Durango, Colorado, and his body was being laid to rest on his family's ranch in Texas. I realized that I had been informed of his death intentionally late and knew it was because I was in no way welcome at the event in fear of possibly disturbing the masquerade of peace.

Our common friends held a new sense of despise for me knowing that I had been hiding our relationship from the world, and his parents hadn't the slightest inkling of a clue as to my existence.

Years later...

Now, as I am driving toward Denver, I look to my right and see your beautiful state of slumber. You are nothing like Taylor, standing several inches taller and being more of the clean and artsy type; but you are the embodiment of who I have been searching for. You are the realization that binaries no longer play meaning in regards to my happiness, and I will allow myself to freely love such an honest smile no matter what body it may inhabit.

In the window behind you, I see a small trace of the face I remember as Taylor's.

From the first night I shared with him, I had a feeling that Taylor would be with me forever. Now, years later, I see him in reflections, hear him on the radio, and feel him under my skin; but it is you I am smiling at, you who makes my heart flutter, and you who I want to spend the rest of my existence with. Holding your hand across the armrest I laugh at how irrelevant my fears were in self captivity. I am proud of everything I was, and everything I have become; I look ahead through the windshield and whisper thank you Taylor, I miss you.