

Rebecca

By: Christian Sandler

I have a wonderful life. Right now, I'm lounging on a lawn chair and sipping iced tea while I look out over Lake Tillery. The sky is cloudless and the dark blue water is glistening in the sun. Trees across the lake sway lightly in the warm breeze. My white house sits on a sprawling, vivid green lawn that begins at the back porch, and slopes down to the dock. Large glass windows provide views from the kitchen and the living room, and are bordered by bright pink flowerbeds. I have a boat and a grill on the porch. It's my dream house.

My wife and I are from Hartford, Connecticut, but we vacation here in North Carolina over the summer. She's great, my wife. She has long brown hair and a glowing smile. She likes to bake and be out on the water. I can see her through the window now, talking on the phone and spinning around to take something out of the oven. She always wears the same red apron; plaid, like you'd find on a picnic table. She's a devoted wife. She's the mother of my daughter, and I'm glad.

Kelsey is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. She's over in the grass playing with our golden retriever. Her hair matches his fur; a deep gold with strands of lighter straw. She's wearing a pastel blue bow in it, and a matching sundress with lace trim. Her eyes are marbled amber stones that sharpen and sparkle in the sunlight. They're electric. Her skin is soft, with meager freckles on both cheeks. She just turned four.

I have everything I've ever wanted, really. A beautiful family. Two beautiful homes. I have a marketing job that pays very well. I can support my family and I can put money away. I'm going to be here for Kelsey as she grows up. I'm going to help her with math homework, and teach her how to drive a car. I'm going to stand in the doorway worried, as she drives off with her first boyfriend. I'm a dad, and it's all I've ever wanted to be. I'm comfortable. I'm content. And yet, I can't help but wonder about what could have been. I feel different now. My passion is gone, and I'm surrounded by beauty, but I don't see it the same way. I can't help but wonder about how I've changed.



"Mark, this has been my dream forever," Rebecca said, her cool green eyes waiting for a response. "You've known this."

"I know, Becks. Okay? I know," I said, burying my face in hands.

We were on vacation in Maui. Staying at this immaculate five star resort on the beach. It was late, probably two or three in the morning. Our room overlooked a courtyard with a pool and strawed tiki bar. No more than a few hundred yards from the hot tub was a walkway leading out to the beach. At night like that, when it was quiet, you could hear the waves sliding up onto the shore from the balcony.

I stood up, leaned over the railing, and looked up at the stars. They formed a canopy over the hotel. The courtyard was almost completely empty, only one person sleeping under a towel on one of the lounge chairs in the corner.

Everything was calm, and a light breeze pushed a leaf into my sight. I watched it dance down into glowing blue pool.

“Why didn’t you tell me”? I asked, “You knew and you just kept...”

“I had to think about it, Mark. Okay? I’ve been thinking a lot lately. Not just about this offer, you know.”

San Francisco. She got a job offer in San Francisco that she didn’t think was a possibility. She was a marine biologist, and the field was thin. Not much pay, and not many options. On and off, she had done work for UConn’s program, and even traveled down to Miami a few times to study, but nothing was consistent. I always commended her for sticking to what she loved, though. She never even thought about doing anything else.

The job out there in San Francisco dealt with otters off the coast. She’d travel up and down the Northwest and go on trips out into the Pacific. The pay wasn’t great, but it was better than anything she’d had, and she’d be with animals, which is what she cared about. So, she knew what she had to do, I guess.

“Thinking about what?”

“Us, Mark. I just...I just feel like we’re kind of just going through the motions, you know?”

“No, I do not know what you mean. I do not know what going through the motions means.”

“I just think this job represents something more for me. It represents a totally new beginning.”

It was our last night there. Our flight was in a few hours, and at this point, I knew I wasn't going to be sleeping. I knew something was off, but I didn't think it was that.

The beginning of the week seemed normal enough. We took surfing lessons and played a round of golf. She was never very good, though. She sliced quite a few balls into the ocean, and I had to press up behind her while she putted. By the 18th, she was half asleep in the cart. It's funny because I'm a scratch golfer; played in college, but the most fun I had on the course was always with her.

She must have gotten the offer on Wednesday. She left the pool and went up to the room for at least an hour. Probably re-reading an email or talking on the phone. She said it was nothing when I asked her, just went online for a while. But it was the something kind of nothing.

When she had something on her mind, you could tell. She'd bite her bottom lip and start doing something with her hair. Either twirling it around, or putting it up in a ponytail. I loved it that way. Her hair was white-ish blonde, like a pale lion's mane. When it was up, there were always a few strands resting near her ears.

Later that night, she went to walk on the beach by herself, which was just strange. She didn't like to be alone. I told her that I'd go with her, but she said "No no, you stay there," like I'd rather sit in bed and watch Training Day than go walk on the beach with her. Like I was too comfortable to get up and go do something she knew I enjoyed.

Even more bizarre than that, though, was on Friday when I woke up and she wasn't in the room. She didn't say anything the night before, and there wasn't a note. There was always a note. Back home, it was rare that she had to get up and leave unexpectedly, but when she did, there was always a note. Whether she was going to have breakfast with a friend for a couple hours, or running down to the grocery store from some milk. I always knew where she had gone when I went into the kitchen and looked on the counter.

"I knew something was going on. You were acting weird, and you should have told me. You wait until literally the last possible second of the trip."

"Acting weird? How have I been acting weird? I've been thinking and..."

"Don't give me that shit, Becks. On Friday you left without writing a note. You went to the spa in the morning, and you didn't leave a note."

"Well, I'm sorry. I forgot to leave a note, okay? I'm sorry."

"You did not *forget* to leave a note. You have never *forgotten* to leave a note. Don't lie to me. Please. All I ask, alright? Just don't lie to me."

"Don't you see? It's little shit like this that's causing us to fight? This is why I need to go to San Francisco alone, Mark. Because it has come to this."

She got up from up the chair on the porch, and went into the room, sliding the glass door shut behind her. I slowly brought a closed fist up to my forehead.

Rebecca and I were high school sweethearts in every sense. We met on the first day of 9th grade at Rocky Point High in Hartford. We had English composition together, right after lunch, and she was the first one in class. It was so like her to be there early. She was wearing a light lime shirt under a white

sweater. Her soft eyes complimented it perfectly, and they were hiding behind her glasses. She had white sandals on underneath jeans that were folded up at the ankle, with a single pearl earring in each ear. She was so innocent.

I walked into the room second, and was drawn to her instantly. She looked up at me from the back corner, and quickly peered back down at the wooden desk. I was in a brand new white polo with matching Sperrys and just the right amount of hair gel. I was as confident as ever. I walked through all the empty desks and forced her to look up again.

“Excuse me, can I sit here? All the other seats are taken.”

That was the first time I saw her eyes light up. Like a minty green lamp turning on behind glass.

“Okay,” she smiled.

“I’m Mark. You are?”

“Rebecca.”

“Hello, Rebecca. I hope you’re a better writer than I am.”

She was. Without her, I wouldn’t have passed the class. She helped me study for quizzes, and essentially composed my essay on *To Kill a Mockingbird* by herself. It was the only class we ever had together, but it was the only one we needed. We had lunch together every single day for all four years, and by senior year, we were *that* couple. The one where someone’s name is always followed by the other. Do you know so and so? Oh yeah, that’s so and so’s girlfriend. Every school has one. Rocky Point’s was Mark Mercer and Rebecca Green. And I loved it that way.

On the night of our last prom, we were sitting on the back of my '97 Corolla, alternating swigs of my flask. Thin strips of moonlight shot through the tree we were parked under. Rebecca was in ravishing gold dress, strapless and lean. Her hair was curled, and a draping gold necklace rested on her collarbone.

“Do you ever think about freshman English? How we met,” she said.

“Of course I do. I remember what you were wearing on the first day I saw you.”

“Really?” she asked, her serene skin glowing under the moon.

“White sweater. Pearl earrings. You had your glasses back then.”

“That’s sweet. We wouldn’t have met otherwise, right? That’s the only way we could’ve met.”

“Yup,” I said, “ Forever my favorite class.”

She leaned in closer and rested her head on my shoulder.

“Can you even imagine? Like if one of us had it another period or if we had another teacher or something. We might not even know each other.”

“Don’t you think we ended up in the same class for a reason? I think we were supposed to be the first two in class that day, and I think the only class we had together came at the perfect time.”

“You’re right,” she said, gazing down at our shadow, “It turned out okay, didn’t it?”

I loosened the tie on my rented tuxedo, and noticed a couple walking with a stroller on the other side of the parking lot. The guy had one hand on the bar of the stroller, and was holding the girl’s hand with the other. They stopped at a car and kissed before lifting the baby inside.

“Look,” I nudged Rebecca.

“Aww.”

I softly cupped my fingers around her chin, and turned her towards me for a kiss. When we released, she looked up at me, biting her lip. I kept my eyes locked on hers, and raised the flask.

“Cheers to our new beginning, Becks.”

I opened the sliding glass door and saw Rebecca spread out on the bed. She was motionless, her eyes fixed on the ceiling.

“And why does it have to be a new beginning? Why can’t this be a step for me too? A new step for us.”

“Please, Mark. Not now.”

“Not now? Then when? Christ, Becks. You know that I will do anything for you.”

“I’m not even going to be home!” she propped herself on the bed, raising her hands. “I’m going to be traveling five days a week, Mark. What kind of life would you have?”

“A life with you!” I raised my voice, “I would have a life with you. And that is what I want. That is all that I’ve ever wanted.”

The fact that she had turned the conversation around and made it about me didn’t make sense. I know that she cared about me, and honest to God, she probably thought about how it would affect me, but this was about her. It was her job, her chance, and apparently, her “new beginning,” and yet, it seemed like she had no idea what she wanted.

“All this time, and I just feel like this is the end of the road. It was coming, and Pacific Wildlife is the end,” she said.

“Where the fuck is this coming from? I just don’t understand. How can all of our love, all that we have, be crumbled by Pacific Wildlife? No. It just doesn’t...no.”

“It’s not all about the job, Mark. Stop being so naive. It’s about our differences and I just can’t...”

“Differences? What the hell do you mean, differences?”

“We’ve made it work for all these years, but they’ve come to the surface and I can’t... I just... I need things to change.”

“What are you talking about? You are not saying anything.”

“Like the golf, okay? And the country club and the \$300 dinners and...”

“Golf!? Jesus Christ, Becks. I’ll never pick up a golf club again. I’ll quit playing. Golf is the problem? For fuck’s sake.”

“Stop it! It is not about the golf. It is about the lifestyle. You’ve become...just...consumed by your job and your rich friends and the money, and I can’t do it. It’s not me, okay?”

“How is this even...” I said, shaking my head.

“Why do we need a \$90,000 Aston Martin? Why do we need that? You used to be so down to earth. Money was nothing to you. Now I’m surrounded by it. It’s too much. I’m very comfortable in our house, but I just don’t need that much. I don’t want that much.”

“Alright. I’ll sell the car. I’ll put the money away. This is easy to fix. Tell me what you want changed, and I will change it.”

“No, Mark. You just...you just don’t get it.”

I was sitting at the edge of the bed now, running my fingers through my hair. My suitcase was on the floor in front of me, and I just kept staring at the side pocket. The one the ring was in.

My plan had been to do it on Thursday. I made reservations at the adjoining restaurant, and managed to get us the back room overlooking the water. It was a small room, with dim lighting and paintings of tropical landscape on the wall. The tables were all set for two, and had smooth black tablecloths draping over the sides. Ours was pressed up against an entirely glass wall that rested only a few feet up from the sand.

Rebecca was in an opulent black dress, with pearls shining in between a sharp V on her chest. Her pale blonde hair was resting gently on her shoulders. She looked beautiful, but it was as if the vitality had been sucked out of her. Her arms were still on the table, and I noticed a stray speck of black in a usually flawless line of mascara. She gazed through the glass.

“Everything okay, hun?” I asked.

“Yeah yeah I’m fine. It’s such a nice view, isn’t it?”

“It’s something else.”

I stroked the left side of my blazer and felt the ring box. My heart slowly started to pick up pace.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Sure, what is it?” she said.

“Back when we were at Rocky Point, and we talked about the future and everything, where did you envision us now? I mean it’s been almost five years now. Where did you think we would be?”

She widened her eyes slightly, and her mouth started to open, but nothing came out. She was thinking like she had a preplanned response but couldn’t say it.

“I’m not really sure. I guess I just...I never really thought this far ahead, you know?”

But she had. We had. We had talked about moving out of Hartford and buying a house together. Maybe in Raleigh or on the coast near Wilmington. One night after a few drinks, we had even decided on a name for a daughter. Kelsey.

At that point, I knew I couldn’t do it. I don’t know what her answer would have been the month before that, or the year before that, but I know it would have been different. I know it would have been sincere. I held a light grip on the ring box, and stared out the glass. I knew I couldn’t do it.

“You’re letting materials get in the way of what we have,” I said, “How can you put a fucking car or...or money between us? It doesn’t mean anything.”

I looked at the folded Hawaiian shirts and new sandals on the dresser. I had bought a puka shell necklace, and a fake Hawaii license plate. It occurred to me that I didn’t really think when I bought things anymore. I just bought stuff that I wanted.

“What we had was wonderful, Mark, but did you ever think it was going to last forever? Not all things last forever.”

“What? Yes I did. And I still do. Why is it what he *had*? Where the hell did it go? We’re right here. You always thought we were for forever. You were right there with me. I don’t understand. This...this isn’t you.”

“It is me. I was confused, and I had to think, but now...”

“Now you aren’t confused? Now you know what you want? Now you know you don’t want anything to do with me?”

“No. It’s not about you. This is about me.”

I really lost it after that. It was like she was masking the truth with these childish and trivial statements, except the truth wasn’t there. She didn’t know what it was.

“Don’t give me that fucking bullshit! How old are we? Not all things last forever, and it’s not about you, it’s about me? Those mean nothing. What does that even mean!?”

I held a fist up to the wall and winced. The door to the closet was open, and I glared at myself in the mirror. Rebecca was still on the bed, stuttering and saying she was sorry. I walked over and knelt down in front of the bed, grabbing both of her hands.

“Rebecca, look at me. Look at me.”

Her eyes were timid, and her breathing was heavy.

“You are my everything. I’m here right now, and I’m ready to be with you. I’m ready to adjust, and I’m ready to fight for you. I will change for you. I will get better for you. I will travel across the country for you. I will travel across the world for you. Just be open with me. That is all I ask. Just be open with me, and we will get through this. Please.”

The first time I told Rebecca that I loved her was on a train back from the City. It was the summer of junior year and we both just turned 18, so our parents let us go by ourselves for the first time. We had just seen Peter and The Star Catcher off Broadway, and it was pouring rain. On the way to the station, we we're both looking up and didn't see a big puddle on sidewalk. We were already soaked, but after we ran through the puddle, we just looked at each other and started laughing.

“So, we might want to find an umbrella. I'd hate to get wet.”

“Yeah,” she smiled, “That would be really unpleasant.”

We walked the rest of the way to the station. It was late at night, so the train car was almost empty. Raindrops clanked off the roof and slid down the square glass windows. I led her to the back row by hand, and sat down in the corner. She curled up in my lap, shivering.

“You know, for being all wrinkly and wet, you're kind of pretty.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. Your hair could use a little work, though.”

I folded a couple strands of her hair behind her ear, and brushed some of her bangs away to make room for a kiss.

“You're kind of cute yourself.”

“Huh. Well it's a good thing you're pretty, because you're clearly a bit crazy.”

She smiled. “Can we do this again? I mean not exactly this. I don’t think a prequel to Peter Pan had any chance, and it could have been a bit dryer, but the trip. Just us.”

“Of course. I’d go anywhere with you.”

“Anywhere?”

“Well, I’d rather not be dragged into Victoria’s Secret again, but yes. I’m always exactly where I want to be when I’m with you.”

I took her hand and gently slid the back of her knuckles across my lips. Her eyes lit up the dim corner of the train.

“I feel really safe with you,” she said.

“Well, I wouldn’t mess with this either,” I said, jokingly flexing my pale, flimsy muscles.

She laughed. “I mean it,” beginning to whisper, “Like that sketchy guy up there with the hood. You would protect me from him, right?”

“You know I would.”

“I like hearing it.”

“I would do anything and everything I could to protect you.”

She snuggled in closer, and laid her hand on my chest.

“The way you make me feel...it’s just...I can’t explain it...it’s...”

She was staring into my shirt and shaking her head calmly in disbelief. I put one hand on each of her cheeks, and tilted her head up towards me. Our eyes locked into place.

“I love you.”

She sat there on the bed holding my hands and just started crying. I held them tightly, and they weren't moving, but I felt them slipping away.

I propped myself up to wipe her tears away and just hold her. The words I had been trying to get out of her were now streaming down her face, and they broke me. I whispered into her ear, knowing she wouldn't say anything back.

“Look into your heart. Don't you see it? It's there. It'll always be there.”

I didn't have anything left. It was like I was shooting at something I knew I couldn't hit. Minutes passed, and I felt weaker and colder.

Eventually, she couldn't keep her watered eyes open any longer, and she fell back onto the bed. I pulled the covers over her, and kissed her forehead before walking back around and getting in on the other side. Light from the hallway shot underneath the door and created a fading shadow on the carpet beneath the bed. It was silent.

Under the covers, I moved my fingers along the cold, wrinkled sheets until I reached her hand. I gazed up at the ceiling, hoping I wouldn't have to let go.

She was gone less than a week after Maui. She had already accepted the Pacific Wildlife job, and even had an apartment in San Francisco in place. It all happened so quickly, and she didn't even want me to take her to the airport.

I tried to live in the house for a couple weeks, but I couldn't do it. I kept waiting for her to walk into the bedroom at night. Every morning, I walked into the kitchen hoping to find a note on the counter.

Eventually, I sold it. She was nowhere to be found inside, but she was also everywhere. I got rid of the Aston Martin, and I probably would have cancelled

my membership at the country club too, but I didn't know how else to escape. The golf course was the only place I could go.

I called once a week for the first few months, but she never answered. I left messages saying that I sold the house and the car and everything, just because I wanted her to know. I wanted her to think about it.

She called me once, almost a year after the trip, wanting to know about some insurance policy or something. I don't even remember. She was off the phone before I could even ask how she was doing.

And now, it's been almost seven years. Seven years in June. I don't know where she is, or if she has kids, or if she's still with Pacific Wildlife, or anything. I don't even think I would know what to say to her anymore. I always wonder if she ever thinks about me the way I think about her. She might not now, but maybe she used to.



“Kelsey! Don't get too close to the water, okay? Come up here, sweetie.”

Her hair blows straight back in the breeze as she skips around in circles on the way up the lawn. Her skin glows in the sun. She's beautiful, but she's not as beautiful as she could be.

“Daddy, daddy!”

“Come here, you.”

I launch her up into the air a few times, and watch her tiny white teeth form a smile. I set her down on my legs, and she digs her elbows into my chest trying climb closer towards me.

“Can we go swimming, daddy?”

“I don’t know sport, Daddy’s pretty tired.”

“Please, please, please?”

I sighed. “Well, alright,” I said, poking her on the nose, “But you can’t go swimming in a dress, can you? Do you know where your bathing suit is?”

“In my big drawer next to my socks!”

“Better go change quickly!”

I heard the back door open before she got up to the house.

“Mommy!” Kelsey yelled, “Daddy is taking me swimming!”

“Is he now? We’ll I’ll be right there.”

My wife comes up from behind me and puts her hands on my shoulders.

“What a day,” she said.

“It’s great.”

“So listen, we need to sign Kelsey up for kindergarten by the end of the week, okay? For some reason, Pine Crest’s registration closes sooner than the others, but we definitely want her there, right?”

“Oh well, yeah. Yeah the Flannigans said they’re great over there.”

“Good. Do we need any cereal? I’m running to the store.”

“Uhh, I think we have some in there.”

“Juice?” she asked.

“Should probably get some more.”

“Okay, I’m going to go help Kels change and then go run some errands. I also have to go all the way out to that little paper place on 14th to get some more stationary, so I’m going to be a while. The ones I’ve done look good though, don’t they?”

I stare out onto the lake and watch a boat skip off the water. A slew of black birds flap and chirp above the dock.

“Mark?”

“Huh? Oh yeah yeah the invitations. They look great.”

“Alright put some sunscreen on Kels, okay? Especially on her nose.”

“I will.”

“Back in a bit. Love you.”

“I love you too.”