

Peter and Laura

Peter had known Laura for as long as his memory could stretch. They weren't high school sweethearts but they did grow up in Austin together, exactly one street apart, their houses in mirrored locations of one another. Peter had watched Laura from afar as she dated countless douchebags from the town, patiently praying he would get a turn. It was such a small town back then. He hoped he would be with her eventually. Then again, he wasn't even sure she knew his name.

When Laura dated Tommy, a drunken musician who would sooner buy his guitar a drink than Laura, Peter would always frequent Carson's, the bar they met at, keeping a watchful eye on his beloved. Peter suspected that Tommy was a hitter for he was always picking fights with the townsmen and Peter had seen him lose his temper at Laura in the darkest corner of the bar, by the pool table, when he thought no one was looking. Laura ran off stricken, mascara rolling down her cheeks, her face flushed. When she met Peter's gaze, she immediately cast her eyes downward, ashamed.

Peter couldn't understand what Laura saw in such a pathetic man but she was infatuated. Then again, Laura was the kind of girl that was always infatuated with men. She had never been single since she was 10. Laura layered her men more than she layered her clothing. She was one of those girls. However, Tommy was her longest, most serious relationship. The second Tommy stepped on stage, propped his guitar on his lap and sang, Laura melted. The whole town did. The prick had a voice like an angel.

As these things go, Laura moved out of her childhood home at 22, straight across town and into the arms of her Tommy. She dropped out of university and started working at Carson's. Laura dyed her hair dark brown, too harsh a shade from her naturally flaxen locks. She got a tattoo of an eagle on her shoulder blade and donned her floral dresses for denim shorts, crop tops and doc martens. Despite her dramatic change in appearance, Laura was still quite the talk of the town, stunning as she always was. Everyone called her Tommy's girl. The title stuck so strongly that many even forgot her name.

The cops visited Tommy and his girl's house on a weekly basis. The two of them would argue like cats and dogs till the wee hours of the morning, high on amphetamines, alcohol, antidepressants and whatever they could get their hands on. Sometimes, Peter would pass by and find her on the verandah, sitting in her rocking chair, smoking a cigarette and looking blankly into space. He wondered if she even recognized him at all anymore for she had retreated so far into her own head.

Peter worried about Laura constantly.

As luck would have it, Laura fell pregnant to Tommy. He paraded the news around like he had just won the lottery. Tommy was excited by the attention it received. It made him feel more of a man, knowing he had knocked up the hottest girl in town. Tommy's girl was having Tommy's kid.

Tommy missed the birth of his son. He was out at a gig until 4am. Laura writhed in pain in their nuptial bed, dialing his number over and over. The truth is Tommy had seen the calls but he was wasted, chatting up this blond traveller from Germany at

the time. He figured Laura was just calling to abuse him for not coming home. She did that regularly.

He knew Laura knew that he was seeing other people. However, neither of them spoke about it.

Laura gave birth to little Oliver on April 4th, 1991 at approximately 7:30am, alone in the hospital bed with just the midwife and two nurses as her witness. She cried and cried as the nurses wiped the sweat from her brows and held her hand. As the midwife bundled baby Oliver and put him into Laura's arms, she looked down at the boy. She had never felt more frightened and alone.

Later that morning, Tommy rushed into the hospital, drunk, carrying a bundle of flowers. He took Oliver from Laura's exhausted arms and grinned from ear to ear. There was no denying that Tommy loved Oliver dearly, right from the second he laid eyes on him.

Things did improve with the birth of Oliver. Tommy became more patient, softer, one might say. His hard exterior that he worked so diligently on presenting to the outside world, crumbled a little. For instance, James caught him helping a frail old woman across the road on North 3rd, and he quit berating Julio for being a 'shitty barback' at Carson's. It was almost like a hair of sympathy was growing inside of him. James voiced his observation in the manner of a light-hearted goading, one night over after-work pickle-backs. Tommy turned to him incredulously, thumped his fist down on the counter and a young couple jolted at the end of the bar.

Tommy's lips pursed, his eyes flickered and James backed off, immediately. James had been at the receiving end of Tommy's wrath before.

Tommy smirked and downed the whisky he had been nursing beside the empty shot glasses. James copied, anxiously.

Tommy had a lot of hate in his heart, but underneath all that was pure gold. It just needed some polishing. Poor Laura had been trying for years.

Like most things in Tommy's life, parenting too was a phase. He took off three months later. Early one Saturday morning, Tommy packed all of his things and tried to duck out before Laura awoke. He was almost out of the door when he heard Oliver cry and Laura stir in their nuptial bed. Within seconds Laura was in the living room, cradling Oliver in one arm and taking in the packed bag and suitcase by the door.

"You can't just leave us, Tommy. Your son needs a father." She screamed.

"I didn't sign up for this. I told you to take your fucking birth control."

"How can you say that?! You were so thrilled when I told you. You wanted this. You said we needed a change."

"I meant a change in address, you stupid bitch. I'm leaving."

Laura ran over to Tommy and grabbed his arm. He snatched it away aggressively and smacked her square across the face, narrowly missing Ollie.

Tommy stormed out of their house, crossed the lawn and piled his possessions into the trunk of his car. Laura ran out after him with Oliver crying in his mother's arms. Tommy turned the key in the ignition and dared a glance at the travesty he had caused. A small tear rolled down his cheek as he fixed his gaze ahead and roared off.

Laura gave up Oliver to her parents almost imminently after Tommy's departure. She lifted young Oliver out of her hatchback car along with his clothing, diapers and some toys she had packed in a duffel bag. Laura rang the rusted, bronze bell outside her childhood home and waited for her mother to answer the door. When she did, she handed Oliver to her, turned on her heel and ran back to her car at full speed. Warm tears rolled down her cheeks as she heard little Ollie cry and her mother call after her. Laura didn't dare look back. She slid the car into first and tore out of the parking spot. Laura would have made such a great Mom. What went horribly wrong? She sobbed and sobbed as she crossed Austin back to her deserted home. At first, the silence was tolerable, almost nice. Laura blasted Nine Inch Nails and cleaned the entire house, in between swigs of Jack Daniels she had found in the bottom of the pantry. She threw out all of Tommy's shit that she found lying around the house. Not before burning it though. She set fire to every photo and document that had his picture or name on it. Halfway through her second bottle, she ripped open her closet and took out all her clothing. Frayed black pieces of fabric, hoodies, A Led Zeppelin shirt that Tommy had loved her in, Laura dumped it all into a black garbage bag.

No more.

Laura quit Carson's and retreated from society for a solid five months. No one had seen her, not even Peter who always prided himself on keeping a watchful eye on her. It wasn't from a lack of trying. Peter drove down her road everyday, trying to catch a glimpse of her sitting on the balcony, her eyes glazed over, mouth slightly open, lost in thought. There was no sign.

One Monday morning, sometime in the spring, he spotted her! Peter slammed on the breaks in shock. Laura lay motionless on the verandah, her eyes glazed over, her cheeks sunken. Her blonde roots had well and truly grown through and she was dressed in briefs and a torn grey singlet with stains on it.

Peter watched from his car across the street as Laura's parents pulled up. Her mother and father rushed up the steps of the verandah. Laura didn't react. A knot formed in Peter's stomach as he realized something was terribly wrong. Laura's mom disappeared inside as her father scooped her emaciated frame into his arms and carried her down the steps, across the lawn to the car. The front door swung open and Barbara came out with a large bag over her shoulder.

"Graham? There's nothing in the house."

"What do you mean there's nothing?" Graham asked as he buckled in their daughter in the backseat, beside her son.

"I mean there's literally nothing. All the furniture is gone, there's no food in the pantry and the house has been painted black."

"Jesus Christ."

Peter watched from the backseat of the car as Ollie reached out and touched Laura's arm. Her head turned to her son, her expression blank. The car sped off.

Like conditional love, heartbreak is a temporary thing. Laura recovered in her childhood home. Her mother bathed her, fed her and tucked her in every single

night for the next three months. She nursed her daughter back to health, took her to AA meetings and looked after her son. Over time, ever so carefully, Laura found her way back to herself. She bleached the dark out her hair and dressed in her old wardrobe. Peter walked past one day and was startled to find her curled up on her verandah, reading a book in the sun. Her hair glowed in the light and she looked like an angel in her white, flowing dress. Ollie lay beside her, his head resting on her lap. Peter didn't waste a second. He ran off down the road and bought her the biggest bouquet of sunflowers he could find. He knew they were her favorite. Laura had told him at her 9th birthday party, outside the cinema, right before she kissed him and all her girlfriends had made fun of her.

Summoning the courage he had always fallen short of, Peter strode up to the verandah. Laura glanced up startled from her book.

"Miss Laura."

"Hello, Peter."

She remembered his name. His heart flipped in his chest. Laura smiled up at him.

"These are for you." Peter handed Laura the flowers, shaking slightly. Laura was bewildered. She couldn't recall the last time a man had brought her flowers, and never sunflowers!

"These are my favorite." She exclaimed. Ollie grabbed the flowers off Laura and held them in his lap, admiring them.

"I know."

Laura stood up from the bench. Peter wasn't sure if he was about to faint. He felt as if he were sweating profusely. Laura put her arms around Peter and he leant down and kissed her firmly on the mouth.

Peter had known Laura for as long as his memory could stretch. They grew up together in the small town of Austin, only one street apart, their houses in mirrored locations. Despite the short geographical distance between Peter and Laura, it took a long time for them to cross paths, but when they finally did, they walked as one.

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Love is a lesson
Bonnie Jean Warren