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ENG 207 Reading and Writing Fiction Short Story #2

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**What Else is New?**

"So, what else is new with you?" Elsie asks.

We're just beginning our lunch, the one I had planned out three whole months ago because our schedules never aligned. It's an otherwise insignificant Tuesday afternoon but she happens to be in Manhattan for a work trip, so we fit our meeting in my one hour lunch break. Before coming, I had made a list of things to talk about in my head, starting with Part A: her new job, how she's liking Boston, how I'm liking New York, my dog, her fiance, our hometown. Then, if all went smoothly, I hoped we could segway right into Part B: our usual inside jokes, banter and the kind of crude, blatantly-honest conversations that probably shouldn't be taking place in a public restaurant. Then, finally, Part C: the deep stuff – most important of which is my breakup. But suddenly she's really in front of me, and we're not bursting out laughing at the professionalism of it all like I secretly hoped we would, then she's asking such an adult question. I'm not sure why that bothers me. We're 25, and I haven't seen her in two years. But suddenly my lists begin to blur together, and I jump straight into Part C.

"I broke up with my boyfriend." I say.

"Oh," her shoulders loosen a bit, as if remembering this wasn't some sort of job interview. "You didn't tell me you had a boyfriend."

“Yeah, sorry, that was like, really random.” I shift in my seat, the wood chair creaking slightly as I cross then uncross my legs. I want to add more, maybe apologize for not telling her about Theo to begin with, especially since he’s kind of the reason I called her up.

She purses her lips together. This is a habit she does when she’s thinking of a question. I’m glad some things don’t change.

“That’s kind of a big thing to keep,” she remarks. Elsie never liked keeping secrets. “So, how’d you even meet your boy– or I guess I should say ex-boyfriend now, huh?”

“He was actually my coworker,” I tell her. “We met a few months ago at the coffee machine. He spilled it by accident so we cleaned it up together.”

“That’s actually kind of cute,” she pauses. “Did you think it was like–”

“A sign from God? Yeah, I was totally convinced.” I finish her sentence impulsively.

She gives me a knowing smile, and a weight on my shoulders is temporarily lifted. This is fine. Maybe I didn’t really need Part A, anyway. “Who made the first move?”

“Actually, you’re not going to believe this, but I did.”

“Wow, look at you! The Alex I knew would’ve just acted like he didn’t exist.” She says. “It’s like I’m talking to a new person!” I know she means this in a good way, but the moment of connection fades as quickly as it came.

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Elsie and I hang our raincoats on the coat rack by the entrance to my house and take off our shoes, patting them dry on the mat. My dog Oliver greets Elsie, jumping up and down and licking her face like he hasn’t seen her in years. He saw her yesterday. Taking Oliver’s five pound stature in her arms, Elsie sprints up the stairs, and I follow closely behind, closing the

door to my room. Elsie drops her backpack on the ground. I sit at the foot of my bed, kicking my feet anxiously on the carpet.

"Ugh, just spit it out, Alex!" Elsie springs up next to me from behind, shaking me vigorously. "You've been so smiley all day, it's actually making me sick."

"It's embarrassing!" I choke out, burying my face in my arms.

"Oh my god. Literally no one gives a shit. You have one friend, and it's me, so I don't know who you think you're embarrassing yourself in front of. Plus, I cannot stand not knowing."

I flop backwards on the bed, letting out an exasperated sigh.

"Again, it's not like you have an audience. I'm the only one here."

"Fine." I say. Elsie always has a way of making me tell her things without thinking first. "I think I like Luke."

Elsie's face drops into a maniacal grin. "Shut up. Like Luke Garcia from math class? The same Luke that, like, exclusively wears those ugly anime shirts?"

"They're not ugly."

"Okay, woah, stop talking. He literally has you under a spell if you think his Naruto shirts are socially acceptable as a 16 year-old."

"He's just nice, okay? We've been talking like, every day in class. And doesn't watching anime make him, like, culturally sensitive?"

She's silent for a few seconds. She's trying not to laugh. I *know* she is.

I hit her with a pillow.

The next day Luke and I are mysteriously paired for a group exercise. I know this immediately because as soon as Elsie enters the class, she looks at today's assignment pairings on the teacher's desk and gives me a thumbs up, grinning cheekily. I'm not sure what she did to

pull this off, but I love her for it. I try my best to hide my smile when Luke sits next to me. We talk back and forth for a while.

"You know, has anyone ever told you you're, like, really funny?" He says. Blood rushes to my cheeks. Just say something. *Think*, Alex, *think*.

"Oh, um, thanks. Yeah, I guess a few people have said that. I mean, not that you're *not* special for saying that. I, um, like your shirt, by the way." I feel Elsie's eyes flicker towards me. I already know I'm not going to hear the end of it.

"Oh," He looks down with a cheeky smile, and I know I've hit the jackpot. "Do you like Naruto too?"

Shit.

"Oh, me? Yeah, totally. I'm such a big fan myself. Everyone knows me as, like, the biggest anime lover." I'm digging myself into a hole. I can't stutter. It's too late to back out.

"Cool. Not many girls like that stuff. Do you think I can… Get your number?"

Elsie, sitting across from me, kicks my leg under the table excitedly. I kick her back.

When we get out of class, she grabs my hand and practically sprints out the door. "The fact that you were paired together, too? It's practically a sign from God."

I laugh. "You totally did that, don't lie! Plus, you think *everything* is a sign from God."

"Whatever. Can we just talk about the fact that you completely pulled that out of your ass?" She topples over with laughter. "Everyone knows you as the "*biggest anime lover*?""

"Shut up."

We take the bus back to my house and Elsie performs her daily routine of greeting Oliver and taking off her shoes. Once we get in the room, she flings her backpack on the chair and starts

screaming. I join her. We're jumping and squealing, and then jumping on the bed and squealing more.

"Oh my god, wait, so has he texted you yet?" She asks, out of breath.

I look down at my Nokia. "Oh my god, he just texted, 'what's up?'"

We scream again, this time even louder.

"Girls," my mom peeks through the door. "I love that you're so excited about something, but can we lower the volume? Your dad has his coworkers over."

"I'm so sorry Mrs. Allen!" Elsie covers her mouth. She looks at me and mouths, *sorry*!

I fall over on my bed laughing, so uncontrolled and so uncontained my stomach hurts.

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"Well, why'd you like him? He didn't wear Dragon Ball Z shirts like your old little boyfriend, did he?" She jokes.

I think for a second. "I guess because he pushed me out of my shell. He got me to put myself out there instead of using my shyness to get what he wanted out of me like every other guy I'd dated," and like basically every friend I've had in the city, I wanted to add. "He was also really serious about me. But oh god, he definitely does not wear *Naruto* shirts."

"Right, Naruto, my bad. What was wrong, then? He sounds like everything you wanted."

I sigh. I figure I should start with the basics first. "I mean, I thought he was. But he assumed I'd be okay with moving to Seattle with him, when he got a job offer. He was, like, already looking at two bedroom apartments. It was like he wanted to start a family, and I guess I was just overwhelmed. I mean, I like my job. I didn't want to quit. But he kind of gave me an ultimatum."

“Oh. I’m really sorry about that, Alex.” I’m sure she means it, but I keep thinking about how she hadn’t even met Theo. I make another list in my head subconsciously – this time of all the things she didn’t know: What he looked like. What he was like. What *we* were like. That he was the deepest connection I’d felt in years. That I thought we were soulmates. That I’d spent Thanksgiving twice with his family. That I bonded with his sisters and I finally felt like I’d met my people in the big city. That one of his nieces made me an origami flower for my birthday. That I didn’t leave my apartment for weeks after we ended things. That I couldn’t even count on anyone for support because Theo was the only person who even came close to Elsie the whole 4 years I’d been in New York. That the *one* time I did find it in me to call her to try and vent my feelings she didn’t pick up, and when she called back and I said it was just a silly butt dial, I was lying.

Now I’m not sure how sorry she can really be. Maybe if we’d kept that stupid promise to actually keep in touch in our twenties she would know all the things on that list that I can’t bring myself to tell her anymore. And then maybe she *would* be sorry.

I almost open my mouth again when the waiter comes by to get our orders. I realized I hadn’t been looking at the menu.

“I’ll just have the croissant with coffee, please.” She motions to the picture on the menu.

“I’ll have the chicken caesar salad. Thank you.” I say.

“Of course, I’ll be right with you.”

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“Luke’s just not the same anymore.” I complain. “Why would he wait three months to tell me that he ‘feels like our personalities don’t mesh’ and that I’m ‘too anxious’? Shouldn’t he have known that from the get-go?”

“I know. He’s fucked up. And over text too? Like, this guy is literally an idiot. You can’t let this define you though, Lex. You’re so much more than him.”

“It’s just,” I begin. “He’s, like, my first ever relationship, and I don’t know if it’s stupid that I thought a high school thing could ever work out.”

“No, it’s not stupid, Lex,” She wraps her arms around me and gives a tight squeeze. “You really liked him, and I know how anxious you get about getting attached. *I’m sorry.*”

She doesn’t have to say it. I know she is.

“If you want me to fight him, I literally will.” She adds.

I look at her, and suddenly I’m acutely aware of how sensitive Elsie actually is, under all those jokes she uses to put her guard up, and I find myself wondering where I would be without her. “Where would I be without you?”

“I don’t know, probably still being a total loner in the middle school cafeteria,” she smiles. “Hey, I’m glad I chose to sit with you that day. Call it fate or call it convenience, but we were meant to find each other at that moment.”

Tears brim in my eyes. She was right – we needed each other then, and how nice it is that we still do now. She playfully punches me in the shoulder. "Okay, wait, I didn’t mean to be all corny. I just meant, like, I needed *someone* to boss around, you know? I’m being so serious, don't start crying, or I'm gonna start crying too."

“Well, too late, because I’m already crying.” I say, half-laughing.

She puts my hand in hers. We cry together. And then we stop. And then cry again. And stop. And then she makes me laugh through my tears. And the night is a puddle of distinctly-teenage emotions but only one that I can still vividly recall: the feeling of having a best friend like her.

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"Look, I don't know if this is my place, but don't you think maybe you should've told Theo that you weren't ready for such a big commitment before you just broke up with him?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I didn't know him, so take it with a grain of salt, but maybe there was a way for it to work. I don't know how in it you really were though."

"How *in it* I was? I was in love with him." My tone is getting slightly more agitated. She doesn't know *anything*. "It's not like I wasn't ready for commitment. He gave *me* an ultimatum. That's unfair."

"Yeah, I know." She says. "But breaking up with him didn't have to be the solution. My fiance and I definitely had our problems too. He wanted to live next to his parents in Boston, and at first I hated that idea, but I didn't just leave him. He's, like, my best friend."

Something about hearing those words makes my stomach churn slightly. I guess I had somewhat forgotten in the last few years – or maybe I had chosen to forget before coming, I'm not so sure – but to her core, Elsie was always a little argumentative. So she's not drastically different than when I saw her last, at least in that way. Shouldn't I be relieved? I finally feel like it's the same old Elsie I'm talking to. She's not really her without that familiar snark and attitude, and we're not really *us* without our silly arguments. All I need to do is snap back, and we're back on track.

But I can't shake the feeling that something about it doesn't feel so simple anymore, because it isn't just a dumb break up and we aren't in high school – I just can't pinpoint it. It's not that she's sporting her natural dark brown hair rather than the usual kaleidoscope of pastel colors. It's not that her outfit is something she would have probably called a corporate sell-out.

It's not that her energy is a tenth of what it was. It's not even that her fiance had now earned the label of her "best friend". It's nothing at all except my own head, which through my lists has perhaps been silently signaling to me all along that maybe I do just feel differently about us now.

I stay quiet for a little bit, maybe slightly too long – a last ditch effort, I guess – waiting to see if she'll add something that has some value to me. *Any* value to me. But she doesn't.

The silence rings in my ears.

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I'm awoken from my nap by a phone call from Elsie. "Lex, I just talked to Luke."

"You did? Why?" I jump up.

"I don't know. I kind of wanted to give him a piece of my mind at first, but then he started talking about the breakup. He seemed kind of hurt, actually." She admits.

"What did he say?"

"He felt like you weren't really showing him that you liked him. So, I don't know, maybe you had to be a little more assertive. You are *so* shy sometimes."

I'm speechless. "I can't believe you would say that! He *hurt* me!"

"I know he did! I'm just saying, like, he said you totally brushed him off when he told you he loved you. Lex, I didn't even know he told that to you!"

"Because that was like, a month into us dating, and I don't even know what real love feels like! What the hell was I supposed to say?"

She pauses. "I don't know. But maybe not brush him off?"

I hang up by throwing the phone to the ground. She's lost her mind. How dare she cry with me and then take his side? She calls again about five more times throughout the night. Every time I see her name on my cell phone, I feel my stomach twist itself into knots, but I don't

respond. I know I can't be mad at her forever. How could I? This is just what she and I do. I'm usually so non confrontational, but something about Elsie not being on my side scares me more than I'd like to admit. I don't have anyone else.

I can't stand the deafening silence, but I want to punish her, because she's perhaps the only person who really gets me in this stupid, confusing life, and no one will *ever* come close.

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I look at Elsie sitting across from me at the table once more, expecting – practically *waiting* – for myself to want to fight back, to prove to her that I'm right because she's my best friend and I want her on my side. I want to be angry. I want to ask myself how she could do this to me. I want to fear for our friendship. Storm out. Ignore her. Insult her judgment. And then apologize and tell each other we are soulmates and could never live without one another, like we did when we fought about Luke, and how we always did with every big fight after that. I want to *need* her like I did all those years before – to get a rush of the kind of anger that gives you a warm feeling because you only feel it when you really love someone. But I've felt it since, with Theo, and I'll feel it again, so that sliver of desire slips away before I can latch onto it, and I don't bother trying to chase after it. I let the feeling pass.

"Maybe you're right. But I mean, what am I gonna do, fly to Seattle to chase after him?" I laugh softly, circling back to Part A. "Anyway, how are you doing in Boston? What else is new?"