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Feb. 15, 1999

Rebound

He sat on his battered old couch, trying to convince himself to pick up the phone and call. Three days had passed. Three days since he met her in the grocery store. Since then, Aaron spent a lot of time thinking, preoccupied by a woman he barely knew. He had little desire to do anything. He missed church, skipped school, called in sick to work. That was ok. His boss, Jerry, was training a new guy this week to run the register, so it wasn't as big a deal.

During those three days, he didn't even take care of himself. He needed a shower in the worst way. Just never got around to it. Needed to eat, too. Maybe he would today. Aaron got up and looked around. Apartment gone to shit. His three-day project lay all over the couch and floor. Drawing after drawing of her. He liked this one, of her posing seductively on the couch, wearing nearly nothing. This one he hung by the door so he could see her when he left the apartment. This drawing came closest to capturing her real essence, her smile, her eyes. Amazing, that in just a few short hours, she could change his life.

Sadly, the seductive pose on the couch had no historical basis. Memory only supplied the figure, face and hair; his imagination guided the pen. As he continued drawing through the third day, he felt his pictures were getting better, nearer to reality. Meanwhile, he could feel his mind slipping farther and farther away. What was he thinking? She was just a woman. Nothing even happened, not really. He wished, oh, he wished something had happened, or that something would. That's why he needed to call her.

Friday started out to be an ordinary day. He went to class, went to work, came home to his apartment. Didn't really talk to anyone. Didn't really go anywhere special. Didn't want to. His roommate, Lyle, was moving out that afternoon, both a good and bad thing. Said he was quitting school, going back home to Texas. When he talked to the bursar's office, they said he could almost get a full refund of his tuition, because he was withdrawing so close to the start of the semester. Aaron was kind of pissed, because he would be stuck paying the rent for two, but he could almost understand why Lyle had to go. And Aaron wasn't all that sad to see him move.

Lyle only came to Flagstaff to follow his girlfriend, Merilee. When she broke up with him, two days before winter break ended, he didn't know what to do. When you dedicate your life completely to someone, and then suddenly that someone is gone, you're left with very little. Finally, Lyle decided to leave it all behind and go home. Aaron never liked Merilee, thought his roommate was a fool to date her, but never voiced his opinion. Normally, Lyle and Aaron weren't on good enough terms to talk openly about that topic, anyway. Sometimes, he even felt spiteful enough to believe Lyle and Merilee deserved

each other. Too bad the breakup made Lyle bitter, or they could have gotten back together eventually. That would serve them both right.

Aaron talked to Lyle for a few minutes that afternoon, even helped him carry his stuff out to his car. Now that he was moving, there was less tension between them. Lyle was going to Houston for the week, to find an apartment for himself. If nothing worked out, he would move back in with his parents. Either way, he would eventually come back to get his belongings and leave for good.

Looking back, Aaron had to admit that it wasn't Lyle's fault that Aaron's first semester at Northern Arizona was miserable. Well, maybe a little. They hadn't always gotten along, which really got to Aaron. He got depressed and lost a lot of confidence. Oh, there were a lot of other reasons. Being a transfer student, moving to a new place and not knowing anyone, being incredibly shy to begin with, struggling in class, having a stressful job, all these things ate at his confidence. In the end, Aaron still secretly blamed his depression on Lyle. It was easier than blaming himself.

After Lyle left, the apartment felt empty. It never completely felt like home before, especially with Lyle there, but now it felt worse. As the sun set, Aaron didn't turn on the lights. If they were on, he feared the illusion of emptiness would mysteriously prove true. He sat in the dark for a while, not sure what to do with himself. He knew no one with whom he could go on a date. He knew no one he wanted to call. No one to talk to.

For a while, he watched TV. Somehow, that wasn't satisfying. Even with 150 channels accessible, not a single show appealed to him. Even shows that he normally watched could not capture his attention. Aaron only found a stream of inane comedies, oddly stilted psychological thrillers, over-dramatic dramas, badly scripted science fiction, mindless infomercials, dull documentaries, mindless commentaries and depressing news. Not even an interesting movie on HBO. He turned off the TV and threw the remote in disgust. Not hard enough to break it, just enough to register his anger. It didn't matter too much, anyway. It was Lyle's TV.

Aaron tried drawing for a while, but he had no inspiration, no motivation. Sketch after sketch ended up in the trash. He tried writing poetry. If his drawings were unsatisfactory, his poetry absolutely sucked. For a while, Aaron foiled around on the Internet, but nothing entertained him. His mind was restless. Aaron knew what he wanted. He wanted people, interaction, conversation. Above all, he wanted a girlfriend. A decent friend would do, though. He never had a girlfriend before. Being shy and introverted always held him back before.

Looking back, Aaron wasn't sure how the time passed, but eventually it did. The endless Friday night transformed into early Saturday morning. He couldn't stand his solitude any longer and couldn't go to bed. He finally decided to go out. Only problem was where to go. Nothing was open at that time in the morning. He had no friends to go see. He didn't know of anywhere good to go. Finally, Aaron settled on grocery shopping. He really

needed the food, but there was little chance for human interaction at a grocery store. Better than nothing, though.

He remembered the drive to Smiths. Looking back, he still couldn't figure out why he went to that store. It was out of his way and there were two other grocery stores closer to his apartment. He chose Smiths only on a whim. Something just drove him to that particular store. It snowed again and the roads weren't cleared yet, so the drive was slightly treacherous. In his frame of mind, Aaron almost wouldn't have minded an accident, just for something exciting to happen.

At any rate, no matter why he went, Aaron was glad he did. He wouldn't have met her, otherwise. That's why he had to call her. Had to see her again. Somehow, despite the rotten mood that night, despite his lack of desire to care about anything right then and despite his inexperience with women, she was able to pierce through his outer shell, draw out the real him. That had to mean something, didn't it?

Once more, Aaron looked at the phone. He pulled from his pocket the number she scrawled on a scrap of paper before disappearing in her car. He should have had it memorized it by now, with all the times he stared at it, willing it to dial for him, or at least give him the courage he needed. She didn't seem to want to give it to him when he asked, but finally consented. Maybe she was just playing hard to get.

He pulled out his calling card, picked up the phone and listened to the dial tone for several seconds. Finally, Aaron forced his fingers to press the appropriate buttons. Impatiently, he waited for his long distance company to connect the call and thank him for using their service. After a nervous moment of gripping the phone, he was rewarded by a busy signal. Damn it! Half tempted to throw the phone, he instead placed it back in the cradle. Well, she obviously wasn't waiting by the phone for him. But he'd get through eventually.

Aaron wanted to see her again, so much that he ached. How could he feel this way in such a short time? He remembered when he first saw her, staring at the tape recorders. Up to that point, Aaron had no idea Smiths even sold tape recorders. There was something about her that gave him the courage to actually approach her. Where was that courage now, when he needed to call?

She wasn't dressed for the cold, didn't even have a coat, which caught his attention immediately. Anybody in their right mind would wear several layers on a night like that. However, it was her dark red hair that held his attention. For some reason, he pushed his cart over toward her and started speaking. He didn't know what he would say or do; he acted entirely on instinct. It was awkward, and almost painful to look back on, but somehow, he found the right words. Her name was Serena. She was from Tucson, not Flagstaff, wasn't even currently attending school at Northern Arizona, although she had once, as a freshman. And, she was looking for a tape recorder. Aaron wasn't sure how it was possible, but Serena felt comfortable telling him her story.

"So, what's a nice girl like you needing a tape recorder at four in the morning?"

She flashed a smile at him, knowing her story sounded a little crazy, even to her, and explained. "I was visiting places I used to go when I went to school here. My old dorm, the place I used to go eat with my boyfriend, places like that. All these memories kept coming up, so I had to record them somehow."

"You have a boyfriend?" Aaron asked, more than a little disappointed.

"No, that was Michael, an old boyfriend. He and I came up here together to go to school as freshmen. We did everything together."

Aaron hoped his relief wasn't too obvious. He finally asked if she came up to Flagstaff for the weekend, hoping he would have some time to get to know her.

She looked a bit sheepish as she answered. "Actually, I didn't know I was coming here tonight. It was kind of unplanned."

"Wait, let me get this straight. In essence, what you're telling me is that you drove all the way from Tucson to here, just to buy a tape recorder?"

"I guess so. There's more to it, though. I was supposed to stop in Phoenix to see my sister, but I was too upset to stop. So I didn't. I just kept on driving."

Aaron wasn't sure what to do, but he knew he wanted to keep her talking. He couldn't lose momentum now. "So, you have nowhere to stay tonight?"

She honestly looked a little surprised, as if she hadn't thought about sleeping arrangements. She shook her head.

"Well, I would be offended if you didn't come home with me. I can't let you stay in a hotel, and there's no way you're driving back to Tucson, or Phoenix, without sleep."

To his surprise, she agreed. As they finished shopping and checked out at the register, she started telling him what made her so upset. Earlier that night, she caught her last boyfriend with another woman. Rather than explode in anger, she coldly told him she was leaving him. What made the situation hurt even more was that the two of them had discussed marriage once. She really loved this man and wanted to spend the rest of her life with him. Then she found him cheating on her.

By the time they reached his car, she started crying. It was cold, she didn't have a coat, and it seemed only natural to put his arms around her to comfort and warm her. She alternated between shivering and sobbing in his arms.

"Is something wrong with me?" she asked. Aaron protested that anything could be wrong with her. She continued her narrative. "It just seems like he lost interest in me, like he just

got bored. I almost saw it coming. That's how it happened with Michael, too. All my relationships just seem to fade away over time. What do I do wrong?"

She paused and took a large breath. As Aaron looked into her tear-streamed face, he couldn't help his feelings. Even though he'd never had a girlfriend before, never really even held a woman in his arms before, this felt right somehow, both comfortable and exciting at the same time. He was falling for her.

"What was your boyfriend's name? The one you just dumped?"

"Oh, that's Brian." She smiled sadly. "I think I still love him. He was my best friend. Even though I felt it coming, this was still too sudden for me."

"Look, there's nothing wrong with you and Brian doesn't have any idea what he is losing. If he were smart, he would hold onto you and never let go." Even though he felt awkward saying such things, especially to a woman he barely met, it felt good to express himself for a change.

"You're sweet," she said and looked directly in his eyes.

It was one of those moments he had seen hundreds of times on TV and in movies. He knew a kiss was coming but wasn't completely prepared for it. Had he more time to think about it, he might have chickened out and stopped her, no matter how much he wanted her. The kiss was not long or passionate, just a small peck, really, but it imprisoned his heart. Then she shivered again.

"We need to get you inside where it's warm."

"I'm warning you, Aaron. I'm on the rebound."

"I don't care about that." And maybe he didn't. It was a little odd that she would kiss him, so shortly after breaking up with her boyfriend. It probably wasn't right, but Aaron didn't care. He wanted to be with her and willing to put up with being a rebound. Who knew what could happen? She might even see past her problems to see Aaron's finer points.

That night ended too quickly. Aaron wondered if he could have done more to keep her there. Or what he could do to get her back to Flagstaff now. He tried calling again and got a busy signal. It took a conscious effort, but he was able to keep his frustration to a minimum. Just then, the door knocked.

It was Merilee. Disgust registered on her face as she saw Aaron's unkempt state. He held his tongue and fought the urge to slam the door in her face. The feeling was mutual.

Shit, what was she doing here?

"Hi, Merilee. Come on in," he said, not meaning it.

Halting at the doorframe, she asked, "Is Lyle still in town? I didn't see his car outside, but I don't want to be here if he's coming back."

"No, he already left for Texas."

"Good. I really don't want to see him right now." She then agreed to come inside.

"Why'd you come over, then?"

"I'm just returning a couple of shirts and the CD's I borrowed." She held up a bag she held in her right hand. Aaron motioned that she set it down on the floor next to the couch.

"Look, I'm really not here for a social visit. I have to go somewhere tonight." As she spoke, her eyes scanned the apartment in obvious distaste of the mess.

Grateful for not needing to entertain her in any way, Aaron agreed that she should go. "Yeah, well, I was busy anyway."

Aaron watched as her eyes stopped on the picture he hung on the wall next to the door. His favorite drawing of Serena, the one that was closest to the real thing. Her eyes narrowed and Aaron just knew she hated it. In what he considered her sarcastic voice, Merilee said, "I'll bet you are."

Something snapped. Aaron wasn't sure what it was. Perhaps the lack of sleep for the past three days. Perhaps the stress at not knowing what to do or how to get Serena back to visit him. Perhaps the frustration pent up from the past semester, living with Lyle, having no friends, dealing with Merilee's prissy attitude. Whatever the cause, Aaron didn't hold in his feelings any longer.

"What's that supposed to mean?" he yelled. It felt good to let his anger out. Maybe he should express himself more often. Perhaps Merilee didn't deserve his anger right then, but Aaron needed a release. His sudden transformation from pleasant to pissed took her by surprise. A small part of him realized that she may not have meant anything at all, but that didn't matter.

"Nothing." She headed for the door. "Look, I just came to drop off Lyle's shit. I didn't come to start a fight. I'll go now."

"No, listen to me, bitch! I have a few things to say. I'm tired of you always looking down on me. I'm tired of your petty fights with Lyle. I'm tired of hearing you always complain whenever you come over here. I'm tired of the way you've always judged me, looked down on me."

Her confusion turned to disdain. "Whatever. It's your problem. Look, you've got issues, Aaron. I don't have to take this." She opened the door and stepped out. Aaron followed her to the door where he stopped to grab the door handle. She turned. "I don't know what your problem is, but Lyle was right."

"What did he say?"

"He called you an asocial, backward bastard that couldn't even shit right."

Aaron almost slapped her, but held back his hand.

She continued, "And now Lyle's acting like a jerk, too. Well, I've had enough. You know what, freak? There's his stuff, in the bag. Now I don't owe him or you a thing. You tell that slime that he and you can . . ."

Aaron slammed the door with a sudden force, not wanting to hear the rest of her insult. She kept yelling for another minute, but he ignored her and headed for the bathroom. She finally left, or at least stopped yelling. Well, that was irrational. Why did he do that? But it felt good. For so long, he'd wanted to yell at her. Maybe he'd find a reason to yell at Lyle when he came back from Texas. Probably wouldn't solve anything, but it would be satisfying. Aaron looked in the mirror. He was a mess. Hair going all over the place, unshaven and red eyes. He was half tempted to shower, but first, he'd check to see if Serena was off the phone. Still busy. Aaron returned to the bathroom and started the water running. Then he began stripping. This would be the first shower since Serena stayed the night.

When they had arrived at his apartment, they sat on the couch and talked more about her relationship problems. Not once did she ask about his life. She seemed intuitively to know he didn't want to talk about himself, especially about his lack of past relationships. She opened up, told him all about herself, cried some more on his shoulder. Aaron congratulated himself. Although he still didn't know how he did it, he had this wonderful woman in his arms, opening up to him. He really felt like they were connecting.

The whole time, she was moving closer to him, or he moved closer to her, he really couldn't remember. Upon reflection, he should have expected it, despite his utter inexperience. She wanted, needed, affection right then. Had he known more, he probably would have caught on sooner. All the same, Aaron finally came to understand her needs. They kissed again, first slowly, then with more enthusiasm, and all the while, Aaron tried to stop his nervous shake. She once asked if he had ever kissed before. He lied and said yes. Every once in a while, she would tell him this was just a rebound, that there could never be more between them. Aaron, now more confident, would kiss her gently to silence her.

Nothing else happened. Not really. Eventually, they fell asleep on the couch, half-holding each other. Well, she slept. Aaron kept waking up, unused to sharing his sleeping space with another person. As morning approached and his apartment grew brighter with the

rising sun, he would stare at her beautiful face and wonder what strange fate brought his life to this point with this woman.

Around nine o'clock, he couldn't go back to sleep. Aaron decided to get up and let her keep sleeping. He would make her pancakes, one of the few foods he could make well. He would surprise her with breakfast in bed, or on the couch, at least. But as he tried to move his arms away from her, Serena stirred and opened her eyes.

"You're awake," he said. "Sorry."

"Don't be. I needed to get up."

"You did? Why?"

She sat up but allowed him to keep one arm at her hip. "I have to get going. Need to get back to Phoenix."

Nearly panicked that she would leave, Aaron told her of his plans. "Don't go yet. You can't leave until I've made you my famous pancakes."

She gave a weary, tired smile. "Are they really famous?"

Aaron had to confess, "No, they're not. But they're the best pancakes you'll ever have."

"What time is it?"

He checked his watch. "Just after nine."

"Aaron, I have to turn you down. I need to get back on the road and return to Phoenix. My sister must be worried." He must have looked disappointed, because she kissed him on the forehead and continued. "Don't be sad. You have given me a great gift. I needed three things last night. Someone to listen, some affection and I needed to cry. You allowed for all three. I'm in your debt for that."

"So stay," he said, almost pleading, now holding her hand.

She shook her head, almost regretting what she had to say. "No. You given me so much and I've only taken from you. But I still can't stay."

Now Aaron felt like crying, but didn't. "No, you've given me so much more than you think. I lied earlier. You are my first kiss."

That must have caught her attention. She cocked her head at him. After considering him for a moment, Serena seemed to understand something, some secret he couldn't fathom. She backed up a little. "Aaron, please, don't ruin a wonderful night. You knew from the start how I felt. You're a wonderful guy and very sweet, but I couldn't possibly do a long

distance relationship. Especially right after what happened with Brian. It wouldn't be fair to either of us."

No pleading would work. She left shortly after that. He was able to get her phone number, though, just before she left. Then she drove out of his life.

Aaron heard the phone ring. Quickly, he turned off the water, jumped out of the shower and grabbed a towel. He didn't even stop to dry off. It might be her calling! He glanced at his watch, sitting on the sink. He'd been in the shower for a long time. The constant water from his long shower puckered the skin of his fingers. He ran to catch the phone before she hung up.

"Hello?"

"Aaron?" It wasn't her. Damn!

"Yeah? Is that you, Lyle?"

"Yeah. Merilee just gave me a call at my parents' place. She told me what just happened."

Great. Just what he needed right then. "Uh, huh."

"Aaron, what the hell are you doing?"

"Lyle, look. It's like this . . ."

"No, you listen," he practically yelled into the phone.

Being in the mood he was, Aaron didn't want to deal with his ex-roommate. He'd wait until Lyle got back to get in a yelling match. He hung up the phone to silence Lyle's yelling. The phone rang again a minute later. He picked it up and set it back in the cradle again without answering. Worried that Lyle would try again, Aaron decided to call Serena once more. He redialed the now memorized number, waited for the call to be connected, and it rang! He was suddenly nervous again. His wet body went cold.

"Hello. Is Serena there?"

"This is she."

Aaron paused, tried to conjure something to say. "This is Aaron."

"Oh. Hi." Another awkward pause.

"So, um, I was just wondering how things were going."

"Good. I finally talked to Brian, Sunday night. Didn't feel like letting our relationship end like that. So I called him up and we got together for a while."

Aaron fished for something, anything to talk about. "What did you say to him?"

"Well, I just told him how I felt. I just needed closure, like I said on Saturday morning."

"Uh, huh." Aaron didn't remember her saying anything about closure, but it sounded right.

"I'm not going back to him, if that's what you're worried about. Just had to find out what happened, why he did it."

A third pause. Finally, he spoke again. "Serena? I want to see you again. Can I come down to visit you? Maybe we can meet in Phoenix or something."

He thought he heard a sigh. "Aaron, I won't tell you no again. A relationship just won't work. I thought we agreed to that Saturday morning."

"You agreed to that. I wanted you to stay." Aaron hated himself for his repeated pleadings, but didn't know what else to do.

"Yes, I know. Look, I have to go. I'm going to hang up now. I don't want you to call again. I'd like to be able to remember this weekend in a good light. I would hate to remember you as some kind of stalker."

"I'm not like that. Serena, you know better."

"Do I? I guess. I'd like to think of you as the nice guy who helped me in a difficult time. If you call again, you aren't really the nice guy I thought you are."

This time, Aaron cried. He didn't let her hear, but the tears were there. For reasons he couldn't explain or understand, he was losing her. "Please . . ."

"Goodbye, Aaron."

She already hung up before he whispered goodbye. Now, he cried openly. It wasn't fair. It just wasn't fair. Gently, he hung up the phone. Dully, Aaron looked around. All his drawings still lay scattered around the apartment. He wanted to burn them all, but that would take energy. He had none then. Slowly, he got up and headed back to the bathroom. Somewhere between the couch and the shower, his towel fell off, he wasn't sure where. Aaron stepped in the tub and turned the water back on, first too cold, then too hot. It almost didn't matter. Finally, he found a temperature with which he felt moderately comfortable, closed his eyes and allowed his body to soak for another hour, long after the hot water ran out.